

THE Hudson REVIEW

DEN CARRUTH:

Ant—a long poem

LIAM H. PRITCHARD:

Grip of Frost

ING SINGER:

a as Expression

RICIA MEYER SPACKS:

Art of Life

LIAM H. YOUNGREN:

s Armstrong

s by WILLIAM STAFFORD, RADCLIFFE SQUIRES,
JEN JAMISON, DAVID RAY, KATHRYN STRIPLING,
H JOHNSON SHERWIN, RICHARD L. KENNEY.

os by RICHARD PEVEAR, DEAN FLOWER,
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THE Hudson Review

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To Our Readers

With this issue, Irene Skolnick, Managing Editor, and Charlotte Wiggers, Assistant Editor, will each end a ten-year association with *The Hudson Review*. Their intelligence, warm good humor, and vital concern for literature will be pleasantly remembered by all who have known them here. We wish them success in their new endeavors.

In connection with our publication of Jan Schreiber's translation of Paul Valéry's "Ebauche d'un serpent" in our Spring, 1976 issue, we regret that acknowledgment was not made to Princeton University Press which holds English-language rights to the works of Paul Valéry.

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Letters to the Editors

Dear Editors,

The trouble with Jean Starobinski's "The Inside and the Outside" (THE HUDSON REVIEW, Autumn 1975) is that, although it affords both the writer and the reader an ego trip, it throws little light on either the texts with which it deals or "archaic" thought in general. The structuralist (Starobinski) applies his opposition-of-the-moment (Inside-Outside) to three carefully selected images, one from the *Iliad*, one from the biblical *Proverbs of Solomon*, and one from the *Odyssey*. Of course the categories fit, first because they are so general and secondly because the images have been chosen for the purpose; and of course the categories distort, since they have been chosen not from the point of view of what Homer or Solomon are actually saying, but for the purpose of reducing the three utterances to a common pattern which can be made to typify archaic thinking, so different, it is claimed, from our own, and therefore to "explain" not only the works quoted but all other archaic works like them, whether extant or long vanished. When one comes to the end of the article it is astonishing the sense one has of having "got to the bottom" of Homer and the Bible. It turns out that there is nothing really very difficult or profound there at all. Thank you, Mr. Starobinski, for having shown us how this "'naive' mode of thought" (336) works—"a mode of expression . . . which has [to be sure] meanwhile been supplanted by other kinds of discourse" (335).

Let me describe what Starobinski does with the *Iliad*, particularly since it is here that he makes his best point. Preparing to refuse Agamemnon's list of treasures, Achilles asserts that he hates as he hates the gates of Hades that man who hides one thing in his heart and says another. Here, manifestly, is an inside and an outside. Achilles makes us aware of the distinction as it pertains to someone who withholds in his interior that which we have a right to hear while giving utterance to words which do not mean what they seem to. As Starobinski observes, it is extremely appropriate for Achilles to compare the feeling of frustration and betrayal which such behavior engenders with the anger which can be produced by the thought of death. The gates of Hades finally hold within themselves everything that men ever love or hope for, no matter what life may seem to promise. Death is therefore the hated withholder *par excellence*.

In spite of this insight, Starobinski does not proceed, as he should, to consider the *Iliad* as addressing itself to the question of what is left in the face of death's betrayal of all things. Instead, he sketches for us a far simpler, quasi-moral tale: if Agamemnon's offer is bogus (and it is, though not in the way that Starobinski supposes), then it behooves Achilles to do some withholding of his own. He must not let Agamemnon



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tempt him to come outside his spiritual defences: he must stay within his tent, and keep his soul, his *psyche*, within "the barrier of his teeth," for once past it, as Achilles says, it can never return. But Achilles is too hot-headed for such a program. Though his father had warned him "to hold the proud spirit in his breast," once Petroklos is dead Achilles' anger will not let him keep inside himself that which, once it is allowed outside, will mean his early death, and he sallies forth with the results we all know. The conclusion to be drawn, we are told, from looking at Achilles' problem from this inside-outside point of view, is, "Unlimited squander has no future but its own end." Come, come, Mr. Starobinski: is Achilles' surrender to Priam of Hector's body "unlimited squander" too?

I am surprised that Vernon Young thinks that Aeneas is dead in the passage from the *Iliad* which he quotes on page 431. I am also tired of hearing everyone hoot at Lattimore's once admired and still excellent translations of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*. Whether one prefers the unorthodoxy of his English "hexameters" to Fitzgerald's blank verse is a matter of taste. Often they propel sound and sense forward in a continuous flow where Fitzgerald seems choppy. Again, if Lattimore is too often seduced by a literal rendering of a Greek locution ("their haughty charioteers, who were lying / along the ground, to delight no longer their wives but the vultures"), Fitzgerald, more fatally it seems to me, constantly tries to tighten up and heighten the Greek. In a short lyric these effects would be admirable, even necessary, but in a long poem they distract from the deeper run of the sense in what soon becomes an irritating way. Achilles to Lykaon:

Nose down there with fishes. In cold blood
They'll kiss your wounds and nip your blood away.
Your mother cannot put you on your bed
to mourn you, but Skamander wheeling down
will bear you to the sea's broad lap,
where any fish that jumps, breaking a wave,
may dart under the dark wind-shivered water
to nibble white fat of Lykaon.

What about the fish that do not jump? For this last image Lattimore gives us, more simply, more ominously, and closer to the Greek:

And a fish will break a ripple shuddering dark on the water
as he rises to feed upon the shining fat of Lykaon.

All in all, Lattimore still sounds to me astonishingly like Homer, more so than Fitzgerald in spite of his constantly brilliant language. Fitzgerald once pointed out that Greek, with its preponderance as compared to English of vowel-sounds and liquids, sounds like Keats, and that he had tried to give his translations the same character. This is a mistake, for whatever Homer sounds like, it is not Keats. The reason for this follows

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from Fitzgerald's own observation. The Greek language being as a whole more mellifluous than English, poetry that we hear as harsh on the scale of Greek sound will still come out sweet (or like Keats) on the scale of English sound, the scale which Fitzgerald is using to measure Homer. By keeping his translations on the harsh side of Keats, Lattimore avoids Fitzgerald's error. He does not sweeten Homer.

GEORGE E. DIMOCK, JR.

Smith College
Northampton, Massachusetts

Mr. Starobinski replies:

A note should have been added to my article telling the reader that it was a fragment of a much larger study on a specific subject, namely on the images, paradigms, verbal means through which the western literary tradition expresses the opposition between *being* and *seeming*, *appearance* and *reality*, *word* and *deed*, *outside* and *inside*, etc. My main concern, in the first part of the prospective book, is to deal with the various poetical or rhetorical devices which have been noted by those who wanted to put *false appearances* under accusation. I did not intend to interpret the *Iliad* or the *Bible*; I deliberately devoted my attention to a set of isolated images. My method, in this paper, is close to that of E. R. Curtius' studies on literary *topoi*, with the difference that I am trying to develop the moral or philosophical implications of each image. I am sorry that Mr. Dimock should have misconstrued my intentions.

Dear Editors,

For a volume of letters by Anne Sexton, tentatively titled *Letters of Love*, to be published by Houghton Mifflin, we would appreciate hearing from anyone who has corresponded with the poet.

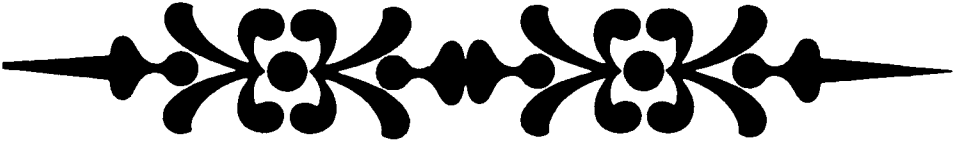
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ELIOT AND HIS AGE

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Paul Ramsey: Poetry Chronicle

Poetry and Fiction

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HAYDEN CARRUTH

Vermont

It's French, of course—our name. And I must think
(since nobody knows) the first to have uttered it
was Samuel de Champlain, an utter Frenchman,
the first, too, to have seen our great green mountain;
first, that is, of the pallidly pigmented.
Yet truth to tell, not many of any color
were here before him. Meager is the word
for our prehistory; we are not rich
in relics, nor in much else, and that's a fact,
which may be why the divers kinds of diggers
prefer New Mexico and Arizona.
Well, the Algonquins lay to westward, Mic-macs
and their kin eastward, what else could Vermont,
caught here between two such antagonists,
ever expect to be but no man's land?
Or at best a land of passage. Warriors came,
hunters came (the two being one in nature),
came to make war and hunt and then go home,
those that survived. They didn't stay. They knew
our ponds and rivers, mountains and notches, knew
all our sublimities, yet somehow left
only their campfires smoldering into carbon
and a few skeletons moldering into garbage
for our three professional and thirteen amateur
archaeologists to ponder. But who'd ask more,
of either archaeologists or relics?
Not I. Vermont shares this much with my other
favorite country, Iceland, viz. that neither
required a dispossession for their conquest.
Iceland was there, pristine and uninhabited,
there for the taking; Vermont almost the same.
That's saying nothing, granted, for the auks,
those great auks who I daresay would have claimed
Iceland if they'd been asked, and nothing either
for the panthers, otters, moose, and wolverines,

and the pine trees of Vermont. What was it like, this land of passage? Green. Remarkably green, and not in summer only but all year round. White pine was what the plant biologists call our climax—nature’s multimillennial orgasm—especially on the mountains: trees as tall as western pines, and brilliantly, brightly green. No wonder Champlain, looking up at Mansfield from his long boat, over the windblown lake, murmured “ver’ mont” and wrote it on his map. The best were blazed with the king’s purple, to be cut down, dragged by oxen to Otter Creek or the Onion River or the Lamoille, and floated into the lake and north to the St. Lawrence, thence by ship to the royal navy yards. Vermont white pine made the best mast in the world. (India, Arnhem Land, have you seen our pines?) The rest were burnt for potash. Now you’ll hike from Big Jay down to Pisgah and not see a pine tree more than twelve rods tall. The valleys, it’s said, had plane trees (where they grow no more), the foothills beech, then maple and butternut on higher ground, birch by the ponds and brooks. Et cetera. Speaking of water, maybe the Yorkers have us beat, some say they do, with Saranac’s wild splendor. And yet, imagine Willoughby back before the people came, including Frost’s Hill Wife (I wish I’d known her): how the sun shone on that blue surface set in its fringe of birch and fir, or how the mists in early morning swirled between the cliffs on either shore, with Wheeler Mountain’s dome over beyond. I wish I’d seen it. I wish I’d seen Vermont, the whole Vermont, just once in that great classical time before the trees departed, once so that I could see now more clearly what it might have been. I know what it is, a land of passage. Oh, there’s some who would deny it, seekers for what they call their “roots.” But when our people began to come they never stopped, and most were passing on.

The Allens and their breed, rough frontiersmen,
 rum-drinkers and free-thinkers, you can't help
 liking them, and yet you can't admire them,
 speculators that they were, manipulators
 of timber, potash, *land*. When Ethan stormed
 Ticonderoga was he the patriot? Or
 was he merely defending the several thousands
 of square miles belonging to the Onion River
 Land Company, which he and his brothers
 had founded? Later, when it seemed he might
 secure their holdings through a separate peace,
 it's true, negotiations were begun,
 secret negotiations, obscure meetings
 with Britishers in Canada, and that's how
 Vermont got started, this peculiar mixture—
 heroism, hardship, greed. It never stopped.
 The farmers came—that's what they called themselves—
 who settled the Allens' speculative miles
 and plowed the hillsides up and down for corn
 until the hills wore out, and then brought sheep
 to graze the weeds. And when the sheep wore out,
 the farmers, worn out too, their women worn out,
 died or contracted a religious contagion
 or moved to Nevada and started over. Others
 came too, the Irish, French-Canadians, those
 who thought they were in luck to work a starved
 and stony land, and maybe they were. The idle,
 the rich, the developers, the ski-bums, the gamblers,
 they all came, seasonal migrants. They blotted out
 what was left of the green mountain to make
 their ski-tows, hostels, and chalets. And now
 they're set to build a dog track, so I'm told,
 over in Georgia Plain—a dog track! That's
 whippets and hounds chasing a tin rabbit. Maybe
 Vermonters need that image of themselves.
 For me, I swear I'd rather have cock-fighting
 than dog-racing any time. At least the chickens
 do what they do without a mechanical motive.

West Bolton is due north of Bolton, East
 Burke is due south of Burke, and, yes, South Reading

is three-and-one-half miles northwest of Reading.
You might say Vermonters don't know where they're at.
"What's the difference, it's all Vermont." Granted,
and so wherever we are we claim our right
to name it: Calais rhymes with palace (only
there *is* no Calais, just East Calais and
West Calais, the center having vanished); Charlotte
is pronounced shallot; Berlin rhymes with Merlin;
Ely rhymes with Swahili. I admire
our independence, so do we all, seeing
there's not much else in this world to admire.
Vermont is what you might call a Society
for Independent Mutual Self-Admiration.
We've had two presidents. Chester A. Arthur
was born in Fairfield (some say Waterville,
but Fairfield's where they've built the "replica"
of the Arthur homestead, dreamed out of thin air,
the original having burned up or sunk down
a good while before anyone noticed, so
Fairfield is where it is), and then passed on
to York state at an early age and never
set foot in Vermont again; Vermont's loss is
the nation's gain. Then there was Calvin Coolidge,
born in Plymouth and passed on there as well,
a remarkable steadfastness. Cal at heart
was a poet, perhaps our greatest native-born poet;
it's hard to tell though, Vermont not being
notably friendly to the arts. Her sons
are channeled into other callings. Cal
went into politics and took his poetry with him.
Who else has put the whole of modern history
into one line of suitable pentameter?
"The business of America is business."
Ethan would have approved that. As for me,
I wish I'd written it, though in my spirit.
I've mentioned Robert Frost already. He
was a Californian. Everyone knows he made
a good thing out of Vermont, and Vermont
is making a good thing out of him. His place
at Ripton is a tourist attraction only

somewhat less popular than skiing and well ahead of the Joseph Smith Monument at Royalton. Well, perhaps I wish I'd written "The Hill Wife" too, though mainly I'm content to read it once a year, and then a dozen or fifteen other poems with it. No, I'd not be Frost. The truth is, first, that finding an honest-to-God Yankee son-of-a-bitch is not easy, but when you've found him, look out!—you've found a humdinger, maybe a Robert Frost; second, that Frost has been a frightful burden on all younger Vermont poets, who have spent years fighting him off, until now at last we dare approach nearer, a little, without the fear of losing our own identities (poetry is poetry, after all, and Vermont's Vermont); and third, that recently the state's become far more hospitable to poets—oh, mind you, not native-born (Paul Blackburn from St. Albans had to take his splendid talent to New York City before he found a home), yet many of us are here. In this one district, northwestern Vermont, there's Hewitt of New Jersey, Broughton of Pennsylvania, Bass of Texas, Edwards of Georgia, Engels of Michigan, Budbill of Ohio, and Huddle of Virginia, all twanging away in one fashion or another of Yankee song, and all of us passing on. Have I been too hard on Frost? Let's say I have. Let's say he made, out of his own bad temper and this forsaken and forsaking land, a large part of our context. Not the whole, not that by any means, but nevertheless a large part. We must come to terms with him, or find ourselves cut off completely. Frost, whatever else you say, possessed a saving curiosity. Yes, he got around, he knew this people, he explored this land; he saw, he apprehended, he perceived, at least at his best he did, and by God that's

seven-eighths of the battle and five-eighths further than most of us ever get. Once Ezra Pound told me in a letter, or hollered rather, "Curiosity, gorbloastit, keryositty—thass wot I'm tawkin ababout!" So bravo. Bravissimo. Those two old enemies had more between them, I expect, than either would have been willing to allow. A hundred years from now they'll almost look like friends.

I'm from Connecticut. But please, not Stamford, not New Canaan. I'm a Litchfield man—Litchfield County, that is—like Ethan Allen. A speculator too? Some say I've farmed this poetry hill for what it's worth. I could offer extenuating circumstances, my life has had them (and maybe not much more), but truly now, what else could I have done, being, or trying to be, a poet? That means a person in the fullest sense. And does that mean in turn something of a son-of-a-bitch? I think Vermonters know, better than anything else, just what a plus-and-minus tangle man is. There was a man of Stowe who wondered which mountain was higher, Mansfield or Camel's Hump, until, maybe to win a bet, he climbed the peak of Mansfield, loaded a ball without the wadding, lay down and steadied his flintlock on a stone and aimed at the ne plus ultra of Camel's Hump. Sure enough, slowly the ball rolled forward and dropped from the muzzle, a gratifying plop, as I imagine, onto the alpine moss. Mansfield was higher, and is, if by no more than twenty rods. On the way down he killed one bobcat for sport and two snowshoe hares for the family pot. The only way I know to do a thing is the directest way, in art as elsewhere. (Though that's not to say the imagination in a particular work may not choose indirection.) Vermonters take

the directest way in everything but speech.
I knew a woman once in Beebe Plain
that had an idiot girl she kept at home
and dressed and fed and babied till the girl
was thirty-five in years and nigh in heft
to two sacks of hog ration. Bess, what for,
they asked her more than once, how come you don't
put her out with the state or in a home?
Bess'd look straight and answer, "Hell, I know
her feed's worth more than she is, which is nothing,
and that don't take in the labor—mine, that is.
I guess I'm used to her, is all. Besides,
if she wan't here who would there be to show me
how smart I am?" That's how she spoke her feelings.
It's something like our feelings for Vermont.

Those Indians who came and didn't stay,
no doubt they had their business, yet they were
in one sense tourists. Did they lay a curse
on our green mountain (like many a tourist since
who's et our beans)? Nobody would blame them,
and something must account for our obsession
with snatching dollars out of strangers' pockets.
Down in Montpelier the state development
commission spends a hundred grand a year—
which is not hay, by God—in advertising
our sleepy farmlands and our quaint red barns,
but not one cent to keep our farmers eating
or those barns standing. How can New England farms
compete with those monster western corporations?
We need a new crop, something that will grow
on hillsides, and on granite hillsides at that.
There was a fellow over in Underhill
who ranched musk oxen and proved it could be done,
but do you think the state would lend a hand?
My own idea that I've been working on
is a neat machine that will exactly crack
butternuts so the meat will come out whole.
Oh, there's a market for them. Rose Marie
knows eighteen recipes. But cracking them—

the butternuts, that is, though Rose Marie's
handwriting can be pretty near as hard—
takes hammer and anvil, and generally it means
bloody fingers and nutshells in your cookies
and a visit to the dentist. Who needs that?
Well, all I need is half a hundred grand.
That's all; no more. Think what the state would save.
And I'd have just enough to get me started
and work out a few bugs in my neat machine.
Then what? That's easy. I'd make all Butternut Mountain
one huge farm and then hire half the town
at harvest time, which would just nicely fill
that slack, fidgetty season after the cider
has been put down to work and everyone
is sitting around uptight, waiting to test it.

Republicans? We've got a few. In fact
that's damned near *all* we had for a hundred years.
Then in '64 we went for the Democrats,
the first time, went for the lesser evil
(that's what we thought) and gave our vote to Johnson
against Goldwater, and you can bet we won't
make that mistake again. Right now we have
a Democrat for governor, which isn't
a mistake exactly, it's an aberration.
I don't know if it's true, but I've been told
the poor guy suffers so from loneliness
down there in Montpelier he has to call
a press conference just so he can find
someone to talk to. Mind, I don't say it's true.
Vermonters are Republicans because
Bostonians are Democrats, that's all.
That's enough. Still there are Republicans
and Republicans. Take New Hampshire,
for instance; over there if you object
to the divine right of state senators
you're a Communist. Why hell, I knew a man
living in Coos Junction who wouldn't take
a twenty dollar bill; he couldn't stand

to carry Andrew Jackson in his pocket. "Gimme two tens," he said. "Ain't it just like them fathead red-tape artists? They design the twenty for a red, then put a great man like Hamilton on the tens." As far as I know there's only one hereditary senator in Vermont, and that's Fred Westphal from over Elmore Mountain way. I don't know for sure how Fred feels about Andy Jackson, but he's carrying Elmore in his pocket and the rest of his district too. Fred told a friend of mine he'd never kissed a baby's face or a voter's ass. I expect that's right. Of course it's not exactly saying what he has done either to keep himself down there in the legislature since God knows when. "He's drawn his pay and 'tother perquisites"—that's what my neighbor says. My neighbor's an anarchist. That is to say, a Vermonter, and that's to say, a Republican. But just because he goes by the same label as Nelson Rockefeller doesn't mean the two have anything in common. They're worlds apart—worlds. Ask my neighbor how he feels about the government—the State with a capital S—and what comes back in pure Bakuninism, only of course with due allowances for different times, places, idioms, and temperaments. "Sons-of-bitches, every one of them"—that's his feeling, and he means Rockefeller too, or maybe especially. Why, I suspect even Fred Westphal might be an anarchist, though he'd turn the color of Ed Wipprecht's best red cabbage if you accused him of it. For my part, what's the use of stalling? I'm an anarchist, have been for forty years, only more a Warrenite than Bakuninite, which is to say, nonviolent and independent, or in other words American, which is what lets me remain a patriot and a son

of the Founding Fathers, like my friend Paul Goodman—
Paul, the city Jew-boy who worked and fought
in New York all his life, fighting for virtue
or even for reason in an evil, crazy city,
and lost, and was always losing, which was why
he liked the country maybe and called his poems
hawkweeds and died three summers past—no, four—
over in Stratford underneath Percy Mountain.
The point is, there's a losing kind of man
who still will save this world if anybody
can save it, who believes . . . oh, many things,
that horses, say, are fundamentally preferable
to tractors, that small is more likable than big,
and that human beings work better and last longer
when they're free. Call him an anarchist,
call him what you will, a humanist,
an existentialist, hell, a Republican—names
are slippery, unreliable things. And yet
call him a Vermonter. That's what he is.

I don't say you can't find him in New Hampshire,
or even Maine—or Australia, for all I know—
the loser, the forlorn believer, the passer on.
But old Vermont is where I've found him mainly,
on the green mountain—on the western slope of it
if you want to be particular—where we talk
with that strange dialect which isn't exactly
Yankee, nor exactly anything else either.
“Calful” we say (as in *calf*), not “cahful,”
certainly not “careful,” and what we make
our livings on, milking them morning and night,
are “kyeous.” O.k. The further point is this:
we are still here, although we're passing on.
You won't hear much about us, but we're here.
I think we are the last true regionalists,
or maybe—who knows?—the first of a new breed.
Not local colorists, at any rate, not keepers
of quaintness for quaintness's sake. We're realists.
And realism means place, and place means
where we are. We name it, with all its garbage

and slaughter, and its comeliness too, and then it is our center—where we are. We try, in our own unobtrusive way, to make it a center of everywhere, a center *for* everywhere (and thanks to Ted Enslin of Maine for saying that). I think and I do believe we know the way to glory, or to what can be glory for this worn-down bedraggled race—peace, freedom, losing, and passing on. And place. We know it if anyone would listen. Most likely anyone won't. Anyone never has.

Well, I've said that Robert Frost had curiosity and took the trouble to go and satisfy it, on foot or driving that bay mare of his; he saw the state, he met the people. Yet my guess is that he traveled by himself. Your typical Vermonter is a man of, say, sufficient winters, or a woman for that matter, walking the back roads, the pastures, woodlots, hills, and brooks, alone or with a dog, and mostly looking down. Curiosity? Yes, but it bears inward as much as outward, maybe more. My dog is Locky, a mixed-breed bitch, though shepherd predominates, and in her eleven years Locky and I have walked these thousand acres ten thousand times, I reckon. Do you think we go on sniffing the same old rabbit trail, examining the same old yellow birch forever? We grow stiff. We plod now, I with my stick, Locky with her lame forepaw, and mostly we look down. And so did Frost. Which brings me to the "all-important question." What is the difference, now at last, between the contemporary and the archaic? I say "drawed" for "drew" and "deef" for "deaf" and still use "shall" and "shan't" in ordinary conversation like any good Vermonter, and sometimes too I write "thou" for "you." So am I therefore

dead? That will come soon enough. Meanwhile
my language is mine, I insist on it,
a living language as long as it is spoken
by living men and women naturally,
as long as it is used. And so with manners,
styles, attitudes, the whole spectrum of appearance.
As for the unappearing, the soul, what further
need or can be said? It is my own.
No, I believe this difference was concocted
in New York City, that necropolis,
city of critics and city of fashion, which is
saying the same thing. It is a place to stay.
But genuine regionalism is not fixation,
not in either sense; it is awareness
of passing on. I don't speak paradox,
I speak for once directly. Place is the now
which is eternal. And we are passing on.
The name of our green mountain is from French,
but sometimes, ungallicly, we twist it, saying
Vérmont with the stress up front. We intend
no harm and only characteristic disrespect.
Once when I heard it I was struck by how
the name might be divided differently,
Verm-ont, the Worm of Being. We are torn
here in this place that is our now between
its beauty and its depravity. The beauty
is mostly old, our mountains and our farms,
and the depravity is mostly new.
We don't hate it exactly, being not
the hate-conceiving kind, but we despair.
God, we despair!—Vermont's protracted gloom,
our end-of-the-winter desolation, April
in our cold hearts. From this we make ourselves,
remake ourselves each moment, stronger, harder,
with our own beauty. Yes, our great green mountain
is the worm of being, long and irregular,
twined lengthwise through our state, our place, our now.
Meanwhile we dream of other, sunnier places.
Myself, I'm going down next month to look
at a house I know of in New Mexico.

WILLIAM H. PRITCHARD

The Grip of Frost

FROST WAS BORN OVER a hundred years ago and came to England with his wife and children just over sixty-four of those years ago, in 1912. He was then thirty-eight, had placed a few poems in American newspapers—local successes—but had no reputation and no published book. It's pretty clear though that he had what was to be his first book, *A Boy's Will*, in manuscript when he sailed for England (from Boston to Glasgow) and he soon found a small publisher, David Nutt. *A Boy's Will* was published in 1913 and was followed by a volume of longer poems, *North of Boston*, in the next year. Both books were intelligently and favorably reviewed in the English press by among others Pound, Edward Thomas and Lascelles Abercrombie; and when Frost returned to America in 1915 he was a success. His poetic career received few setbacks from that time on. Frost's life in London, Beaconsfield and Gloucestershire, his ups and downs with big names like Pound and Yeats (he invariably spelled it "Yates"), his friendship with smaller ones like the Georgians—Gibson, Abercrombie, W. H. Davies, his deep relationship with Edward Thomas—this story can best be gleaned from the letters he and his wife wrote during those years. They lay claim to being thought the most interesting and revealing ones, certainly as they bear on the poems Frost was then writing, of any period in his life; and I will raid them in order to extract some formulations and characteristics of expression, then put them in relation to a few of his most anthologized and a few of his lesser-known poems. Not to explain the poems by consulting letters or biography, but to compare the human presence in each.

On Christmas Day, 1912, he wrote to his ex-employer, a school principal in New Hampshire: "We have had ice (a few times) on the rain barrel if that constitutes winter. And one morning early in December the papers were out with scare heads like this:

ENGLAND IN THE GRIP OF FROST

I accept the omen, says I, I accept the omen. Better so than that Frost should be in the grip of England." First he patronizes the

English winter, then the Fleet Street criers who haven't been through a Real New England winter. You can do anything with words, granted the requisite amounts of imaginative play and witty aggression—"Better so than that Frost should be in the grip of England"; this is the thrust of poetry which he was later to define, in one among many ways, as "organized violence upon language." Another sentence, again to a friend back home, puts together and does in a drunkard poet from the 'nineties and England's dry inhospitality to the thirsty American visitor: "I wonder what Dowson would say if he were alive as he might have been with a little less liquor and a little more of the water one sees so seldom over here—never a drop of it in lunch rooms, railroad stations, or streets." Or he describes the follies of a talented poet, Davies, whose conceit is such that, Frost says, one might misjudge him as simply asinine:

We have had a good deal of him at the house for the last week and the things he has said for us to remember him by! He entirely disgusted the Gibsons with whom he was visiting. His is the kind of egotism another man's egotism can't put up with. He was going on from here to be with Joseph Conrad. He said that would be pleasant because Conrad knew his work *thoroughly*. After waiting long enough to obscure the point we asked him if he knew Conrad's work *thoroughly*. Oh no—was it good? We told him yes. He was glad we liked it.

Easy enough to demonstrate the egotist's well-padded insensitivity to others, but Frost's sentence invokes also "the kind of egotism another man's egotism can't put up with," and that other man is very much the annoyed young poet who doesn't know Conrad, doesn't have "work" to be known thoroughly, so must find a vantage point for his ire in the turning of a phrase.

These three moments are alike in displaying aggressive performances through which possible defeat (by England, by other poets) is turned into momentary victory, but also in the unmistakable way they sound a voice speaking. From numbers of Frost's remarks on this his favorite subject, here are two: "*The ear does it*. The ear is the only true writer and the only true reader. I have known people who could read without hearing the sentence sounds and they were the fastest readers. Eye readers we call them. They can get the meaning by glances. But they are bad readers because they miss the best part of what a good writer puts into his work." And more briefly, "Never if you can help it write down a sentence in which the voice

will not know how to posture *specially*.” Remember then how specially we heard the posture of

I accept the omen, says I, I accept the omen. Better so than that Frost should be in the grip of England.

. . . a little less liquor and a little more of the water one sees so seldom over here . . .

We asked him if he knew Conrad’s work *thoroughly*. Oh no—was it good? We told him yes. He was glad we liked it.

What difference does it make then when we are dealing with something that’s recognizably a poem, broken into lines of verse, printed on a page in Frost’s first collection and titled “In Neglect”:

They leave us so to the way we took,
As two in whom they were proved mistaken,
That we sit sometimes in the wayside nook,
With mischievous, vagrant, seraphic look,
And *try* if we cannot feel forsaken.

In case we might not hear the special posture of its final line, Frost cheats a bit with the italics. But the fun here is all in the lightning succession of unobvious words—mischievous, vagrant, seraphic—carried by a voice into that final “And *try* if we cannot feel forsaken.”

Frost speaks of the “sound of sense” as his own original and significant contribution to English poetry, writing thus to a close friend in America: “To be perfectly frank with you I am one of the most notable craftsmen of my time. That will transpire presently.” Tennyson and Swinburne created the most elaborate vowel music and assonance ever heard, so they are the end of the line. It is instead the sound of sense, “the abstract vitality of our speech” which he is after, something more abstract than the particular meanings of “try” or “forsaken” in that poem’s last line. What the poet must do is skilfully to break the sounds of sense “with all their irregularity of accent across the regular beat of the metre.” That is where the life of poetry begins and where any consideration of Frost, if it is to touch the poems where they live, should begin as well.

But perhaps this way of talking sounds too formal, too much the

literary professor's devotion to style and the rhythms of poetry. What, one may ask, is the relation between—is there a relation between—technique and substance, between Frost's cultivation of speaking voices and his concerns, impulses, obsessions and aspirations as a human being? Just past age forty and returned to America, he wrote this way about the poems in *A Boy's Will*:

The book is an expression of my life for the ten years from eighteen on when I thought I greatly preferred stocks and stones to people. The poems were written as I lived the life quite at the mercy of myself and not always happy . . . I kept farm, so to speak, for nearly ten years, but less as a farmer than as a fugitive from the world that seemed to me to "disallow" me. It was all instinctive, but I can see now that I went away to save myself and fix myself before I measured my strength against all creation.

This is extraordinary, and remains no less so when we note that he is really writing his own publicity here, since the letter is addressed to a journalist-anthologist who wrote about and published Frost's work. It is his earliest version of himself as poet and hero, his first book of poems seen as "the unforced expression of a life I was forced to live." That life is everything—farm labor, lack of money, sickness, marriage, children, death—everything that is not poetry. He sees even his interest in other people as "at first no more than an almost technical interest in their speech—in what I used to call their sentence sounds—the sound of sense." Thus to imagine the speaking voice is somehow the way out of misery, and a way of getting back on the world that seemed to have disallowed him.

Here is what perhaps the best of these early poems sounds like:

There was never a sound beside the wood but one,
And that was my long scythe whispering to the ground.
What was it it whispered? I knew not well myself;
Perhaps it was something about the heat of the sun,
Something, perhaps, about the lack of sound—
And that was why it whispered and did not speak.
It was no dream of the gift of idle hours,
Or easy gold at the hand of fay or elf:
Anything more than the truth would have seemed too weak
To the earnest love that laid the swale in rows,
Not without feeble-pointed spikes of flowers

(Pale orchises), and scared a bright green snake.
The fact is the sweetest dream that labor knows.
My long scythe whispered and left the hay to make.

When Frost said about “Mowing” that “I come so near what I long to get that I almost despair of coming nearer” he was as right as he knew, for it could be argued that he never wrote a better poem. Yet what is there in “Mowing” except a beautifully supple voice breaking across itself, questioning, perhapsing, declaring itself in an unbroken rhythmic arc. How expressive does he make the innocent tools of punctuation:

It was no dream of the gift of idle hours,
Or easy gold at the hand of fay or elf:
Anything more than the truth would have seemed too weak
To the earnest love that laid the swale in rows,
Not without feeble-pointed spikes of flowers
(Pale orchises), and scared a bright green snake.

Those feeble-pointed spikes of flowers are not only not spared by the impartial scythe, they are not left unnamed by the speaker, though parenthetically only. This parenthesis is the embodied expression of that strong “truth” which seems to be recommended in mowing as in art: truth which may even make you free, the unforced expression of the life you’re forced to live.

“The fact is the sweetest dream that labor knows”—somehow we take the assertion in and nod vaguely without puzzling over what it might mean. It’s the way a poet talks. But here is the poet talking in a less elevated way in another letter home from early in his English stay:

... there is a kind of success called “of esteem” and it butters no parsnips. It means a success with the critical few who are supposed to know. . . . I must get outside that circle to the general reader who buys books in their thousands. . . . I want to be a poet for all sorts and kinds. I could never make a merit of being caviare to the crowd as my quasi-friend Pound does. I want to reach out, and would if it were a thing I could do by taking thought.

Frost was to have it both ways, and very soon: success of esteem and with the general reader. “Mowing” continues to reach out

from numerous anthologies and from the copies of Frost's collected poems that sell by the thousands. At which point a reader who likes to think of himself as "one of the critical few" draws back nervously. Yeats's "Leda and the Swan," Eliot's "Gerontion," Stevens' "The Snow Man," these are good poems and difficult ones—modern ones; while "Mowing" runs right along smoothly without a hitch and is filled with acceptable objects like hay and flowers and a lovable old scythe whispering away. So the "critical few" have been known to explain Frost's success with the general reader (where, say, Stevens failed) by cynically describing him as a clever manipulator of conventionally benign material, of Nature as a place to be alone in and have good deep thoughts.

But we should attempt to hear the poem Frost wrote. "I am not undesigning," he said in a letter; neither is "Mowing" artless. For years I had carelessly read it as a pleasantly atmospheric lead-up to a message finally whispered to man by the wise scythe—until I noticed that Frost put a period between the final two lines:

The fact is the sweetest dream that labor knows.
My long scythe whispered and left the hay to make.

"Whispered" not by communicating a big truth from Nature's rich store of them on ready-call for delivering to man, but just whispering, as it were, the way scythes whisper—to the ground, or leaving the hay to make. This is the truth, and anything more than the truth would have seemed too weak. And talk about the fact being the sweetest dream is made by a man, by a poet, by the imagination putting things together in a moment of special posturing. If then you run the lines together—"The fact is the sweetest dream that labor knows, my long scythe whispered"—you will have mistaken the posture. But if a poet wants to speak to "all sorts and kinds" of readers, it may well be that some of them will read him too simply, will hear him wrongly. Frost was willing to run that risk.

He ran it with "Mending Wall," the most popular (along with "Death of the Hired Man") of the poems in *North of Boston*. These poems set out to render speech so flatly and unadornedly that it would constitute something new; in only one of them—"After Apple-Picking"—does Frost, as he put it, "intone" rather than speak. Yet much of the attention paid "Mending Wall" has been to

the question of whether Frost was for or against walls, barriers between human beings. "Something there is that doesn't love a wall" or "Good fences make good neighbors"—which do you choose? When in his last years he visited Russia on behest of the State department there was much earnest Communist concern about whether he was out to knock down the Berlin Wall, recently erected. In fact, like so many of Frost's poems "Mending Wall" works on the ear to move us into a position where we can't be for or against walls, where we have to say, well, yes and no. Or rather, where our interest in the whole matter has been translated to a different level. In the poem's first line, "Something there is that doesn't love a wall," everything is open, and a strong accent could be given to "Something" or "is" or "doesn't" or "love" or "wall." Thirty-five lines later it recurs, as the thoughtful speaker says, apropos his stubborn neighbor, that

Before I built a wall I'd ask to know
What I was walling in or walling out,
And to whom I was like to give offense.
Something there is that doesn't love a wall,
That wants it down." . . .

Is it "something" or "love" that must now carry the strongest accent? The important point is that a wonderfully flexible, living speech has developed within the poem to the point of making us, like Frost in his early years, almost more interested in the technique of speech than in "people."

Then, as one whose boundary conflicts with his neighbor amount to not much more than wondering whether I'm cutting his grass or not quite getting to all of mine, I am convicted of inattention, lack of imagination and just sheer dullness by the conclusion to "Mending Wall":

Something there is that doesn't love a wall,
That wants it down. I could say "Elves" to him,
But it's not elves exactly, and I'd rather
He said it for himself. I see him there,
Bringing a stone grasped firmly by the top
In each hand, like an old-stone savage armed.
He moves in darkness as it seems to me,

Not of woods only and the shade of trees.
He will not go behind his father's saying,
And he likes having thought of it so well
He says again, "Good fences make good neighbors."

This climax can be reduced to a message about how sad it is that there are unenlightened people in the world who unthinkingly believe in barriers—it could, that is, be a United Nations poem. But only if all the poetry is left out, the old-stone savage with one in each hand grasped firmly by the top. And by ignoring the very strange thing that happens to the poet's voice (and I distinguish it from the more colloquial, unbuttoned one of the "I"—"I could say 'Elves' to him,/But it's not elves exactly . . ."). The poet's voice is heard at the moment where the "I" becomes rapt in his vision of the neighbor transformed into prehistoric man:

He moves in darkness as it seems to me,
Not of woods only and the shade of trees.

This is both portentous and strangely unemphatic, with "as it seems to me" floating over the assertion; while "Not of woods only and the shade of trees" in its inverted order and dreamily detached "shade of trees" seems to touch a still center of something. Here is the heart of the matter, at any rate, and that heart lies beyond any further words of understanding explanation, or moralizing reproof, we try to put to it. "The fact is the sweetest dream that labor knows"—something comparable happened there in an analogous moment of impersonal awareness, and I think something that's even beyond Frost's own words about the importance of getting unmistakable sentence sounds into poetry. The sentence sounds made at these moments in "Mowing" and "Mending Wall" are unmistakable all right; just as long as you don't ask us to say exactly what it is they are saying. Our ears seem to be a jump or two ahead of our faculties of articulation and rationalization.

In his introduction to a recent Penguin selection of Frost's poems, Ian Hamilton notes that the poet has been much admired for "his promotion of ideals of separateness, of self-reliance" and that this positive attitude is likely to shade off, depending on the circumstances, into "withdrawal, separation, alienation" or a "low-spir-

ited sense of exclusion." When fifteen years ago Lionel Trilling shocked some people by presenting Frost as the poet of terror and darkness, it looked as if he could at last be accepted as a modern writer, with not just low spirits but the requisite amount of existential dread. But it is usually a mistake to speak very many sentences about what the poetry is "really" about unless one tests each claim by inspecting how one actually reads, hears, responds to particular moments in poems. You can if you wish identify an attitude as "pessimistic" or "alienated," but those words don't spring to the lips as we pick our way through the developing performance of a poem so much more interesting than they can suggest. Yes, Frost is the poet of isolation and dread; just as he is the poet of aspiration, love, remembered fulfillment:

Love at the lips was touch
As sweet as I could bear;
And once that seemed too much;
I lived on air

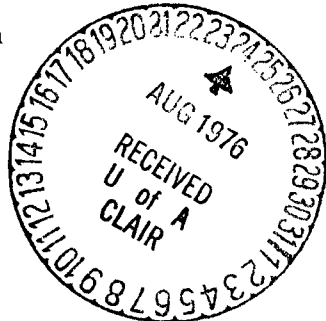
That crossed me from sweet things,
The flow of—was it musk
From hidden grapevine springs
Down hill at dusk?

I had the swirl and ache
From sprays of honeysuckle
That when they're gathered shake
Dew on the knuckle.

I craved strong sweets, but those
Seemed strong when I was young;
The petal of the rose
It was that stung.

Now no joy but lacks salt
That is not dashed with pain
And weariness and fault;
I crave the stain

Of tears, the aftermark



Of almost too much love,
The sweet of bitter bark
And burning clove.

When stiff and sore and scarred
I take away my hand
From leaning on it hard
In grass and sand,

The hurt is not enough:
I long for weight and strength
To feel the earth as rough
To all my length.

"To Earthward" is about, in the recent phrase, the "too much"; about how the swirl and ache and sting of sensuous experience now vividly presents itself in imagination, for all its absence in present fact. "Bodily decrepitude is wisdom; young/We loved each other and were ignorant" says the Yeats poem; but compared to the developing attitude in "To Earthward" Yeats's wisdom seems clearly assimilable and without the stated particularity of—"was it musk," or the shaken dew from gathered honeysuckle.

What Frost has in common with Yeats—and among the modern poets they have it superbly—is the dramatic unfolding of sentences, the expressive surprise of an urgent syntax. Over the break between stanzas crosses the sentence, then hesitates, turns itself into a question: "I lived on air/ That crossed me from sweet things,/ The flow of—was it musk/ From hidden grapevine springs/ Down hill at dusk?" Or the deprivations of "Now" are peculiarly insisted upon by an imitation of awkwardness, a straining of sensible syntax:

Now no joy but lacks salt,
That is not dashed with pain
And weariness and fault;
I crave the stain

Of tears . . .

It is this urgency, the sense of a voice straining for adequate

utterance of what it was like and what it's like now, that makes this poem memorable for something other than an attitude or a truth about life to be stored up by us in our storehouse of recorded truths. To go to Yeats once more: for all the difficulty his poetry presents there is usually nothing difficult about the pose he strikes towards his reader; we are strongly invited to assent, shake our heads in shared despair, joyfully participate in revelation. Frost has always the listener, the ear-reader very much in mind; yet a poem like "To Earthward" doesn't exactly speak to us, doesn't coach us into responses we're supposed to imitate. Often he leaves us very much on our own, with only the poem to read again.

This is a poet who once defined tragedy as occurring when something terrible happens and nobody's to blame; and it is now generally recognized that he wrote many poems in which pretty terrible things happen. But one can't get the terror or the tragedy rightly weighed unless the ear-reader is consulted on what he hears. Consider a longer poem in which something terrible happens and nobody's to blame:

The buzz saw snarled and rattled in the yard
And made dust and dropped stove-length sticks of wood,
Sweet-scented stuff when the breeze drew across it.
And from there those that lifted eyes could count
Five mountain ranges one behind the other
Under the sunset far into Vermont.
And the saw snarled and rattled, snarled and rattled,
As it ran light, or had to bear a load.
And nothing happened: day was all but done.
Call it a day, I wish they might have said
To please the boy by giving him the half hour
That a boy counts so much when saved from work.
His sister stood beside them in her apron
To tell them "Supper." At the word, the saw,
As if to prove saws knew what supper meant,
Leaped out at the boy's hand, or seemed to leap—
He must have given the hand. However it was,
Neither refused the meeting. But the hand!
The boy's first outcry was a rueful laugh,
As he swung toward them holding up the hand,
Half in appeal, but half as if to keep

The life from spilling. Then the boy saw all—
Since he was old enough to know, big boy
Doing a man's work, though a child at heart—
He saw all spoiled. "Don't let him cut my hand off—
The doctor, when he comes. Don't let him, sister!"
So. But the hand was gone already.
The doctor put him in the dark of ether.
He lay and puffed his lips out with his breath.
And then—the watcher at his pulse took fright.
No one believed. They listened at his heart.
Little—less—nothing!—and that ended it.
No more to build on there. And they, since they
Were not the one dead, turned to their affairs.

In one sense "Out, Out—" is absolutely straightforward: a scene sketched in, the rattling saw, the catastrophe and its aftermath. Yet the narrator's behavior is strange; at one moment he is a detached and wide-ranging voice that can see the mountains ranged behind each other far into Vermont. At the next moment a most homely-colloquial chap sighing "Call it a day, I wish they might have said/ To please the boy . . ." Then a rather shockingly playful conceit-maker about the dread moment itself—"As if to prove saws knew what supper meant," or the pretence that boy and saw are just becoming acquainted—"However it was,/ Neither refused the meeting." Most troubling of all is the poem's conclusion where the boy dies and in two lines the other people are dispensed with:

No more to build on there. And they, since they
Were not the one dead, turned to their affairs.

First we may say, how callous this voice sounds, how unavailing of the opportunities for taking grief and death seriously. Then we correct ourselves: no, this is deliberate callousness, or the imitation of callousness. But to what end? To the end of cruelly pointing out the survivors' failure to persist in grief, to do anything more than turn to their affairs? But there is no reason, from anything previously given in the poem, to suspect the survivors of callousness, or to see this as some moral criticism of human imperviousness to death. And even if such a criticism were involved, a poet might

think twice about trying to get it out and over in two lines. Who does he think *he* is, anyway? Or perhaps the turning back to worldly affairs is there for admiration: you fail so to turn back only, in fact, when you are the one dead.

Round and round we may go; but one thing is I think clear—that Frost has provided no way, through a significant not-to-be-missed tone in the speaker's final commentary, for us to get off the hook. Again, compared with Yeats: "We must dance and we must sing,/ We are blessed by everything,/ Everything we look upon is blessed." So be it, amen and hurrah. Frost, or Frost's narrator—whatever we choose to call the poem's speaker—pronounces "So" at the beginning of a line, or exclaims "Little—less—nothing!", or says "No more to build on there." But *how* does he say it? Is it not strange that a poet who built his whole work on the prime importance of the speaking voice with its unmistakable posture in this line and the next, should at crucial moments withhold from us just those very postures as sound unmistakably this way rather than that? It may be, of course, that I'm simply showing up my own inabilities to hear well enough how something is said; but I believe rather that it's something distinctive about Frost's work, separating him from other modern poets and also making him difficult to exhaust, to wrap up in interpretative wrapping.

Since the publication of Thompson's biography, particularly the second volume, we have had to accept the fact—if we hadn't already guessed it—that Frost was more human than the legend had it, than the ingratiating "I sha'n't be gone long.—You come too." had it. More human, and since he couldn't be in fact any humanly better than we'd been taught to imagine him he came out quite a bit worse. He, God forgive him, was not Your Splendid Husband or Father; he was jealous and spiteful, especially towards rivals; he was careerist beyond our wildest dreams. He was in short so human that he reduced his biographer to a nagging, head-shaking reprover of a scold. Better so, we might imagine him saying, to have Thompson in the grip of Frost than the other way around. And though one could find enough perverse or anti-democratic sentiment in the poems themselves to insure that Frost was not Albert Schweitzer, it was easy to forget, as Ian Hamilton lately phrased it, "the point at which self-reliance is indistinguishable from self-centredness, from simple misanthropy." Frost wanted to believe that in writing *A Boy's Will*, in becoming a poet, he had

found a way back from solitude, loneliness, misanthropy to its opposite: public success, a man speaking to men, the social function of poetry. But such a complete turnabout is unlikely to occur at age forty. So the "bad" attitudes not only stayed around in the poems, they made them more, not less human, certainly more troubling and disturbing of a reader. In designedly "light" poems, in squibs, in the outbursts he frequently allowed himself in his later years, such attitudes could be snarled or grinned out defiantly:

Mary had a little lamb
Its name was Jesus Christ;
God, not Joseph, was the ram,
But Joseph took it nice.

Or in the first stanza of a recently-published one, "Pride of Ancestry":

The deacon's wife was a bit desirish
And liked her sex relations wild,
So she lay with one of the shanty Irish
And he begot the deacon's child.

But when the poem was serious, seriously meditative, when the texture was thick instead of thin, no such loud jokes were possible. And it is then that the voice which both says and yet does not say what it means comes into play.

This is the realm of irony, a form of guardedness Frost called it, of saying one thing and meaning another. Not meaning the opposite, where the meaning cancels out the saying and is the truth which underlies superficial appearance, but meaning another: the saying and the meaning both valid possibilities to be entertained by the reader. Consider in these terms the following short poem, much admired in recent years:

The people along the sand
All turn and look one way.
They turn their back on the land.
They look at the sea all day.

As long as it takes to pass
A ship keeps raising its hull;
The wetter ground like glass
Reflects a standing gull.

The land may vary more;
But wherever the truth may be—
The water comes ashore,
And the people look at the sea.

They cannot look out far.
They cannot look in deep.
But when was that ever a bar
To any watch they keep?

The observers in “Out, Out—” kept their watch only until the boy died; in “Neither Out Far Nor In Deep” they will persist, to what end the poem purports to inquire. Since Jarrell’s splendid essay on Frost it has been the custom to speak of this poem as one of Frost’s darkest: Ian Hamilton says in his Penguin introduction that “It is difficult to imagine anything more terminally desolate than that,” and calls it one of the poems where he was “truly and desolately himself,” a poem which “inhabits, stoically, a friendless realm.” Critics hold it up as evidence that Frost was no genial purveyor of comforting wisdom; yet before we nod too quickly in affirming and, as moderns, approving its “desolation” we should look again and express surprise that sixteen tiny lines, mostly filled with monosyllabic words, patly rhymed (sand/land; deep/keep) can even be a plausible candidate in the terminal desolation poetry sweepstakes. After all, there is *King Lear*, Dido’s lament, Coleridge’s “Dejection” ode, *In Memoriam* or *The Waste Land*. These poems are in their different ways eloquent about desolation, passionate about not having friends or lovers or a purpose to life. They expose and hold up their wounds for us to see. Frost’s poem does not do this: it says one not very startling thing, unstartlingly; perhaps it means another much larger and impressively bleak thing. But the fact is that it simply won’t abide questions about its nature. How does the speaker-poet feel about the people looking at the sea? Are they persistent dupes or dopes? Is it clear that the poet himself doesn’t spend his time in so looking, and do we? Should we? Or are we

perhaps to admire the brave fidelity with which they persist in an impossible task? Is this a moving tribute to the vulnerability and vanity of human wishes? Terminally desolate—one sees the sense in which it is that; but on the next look it seems a clever, playful, heartless recipe for human frailty, with no sympathetic tone to uplift it and make it noble.

Indeed, with no tone of any sort that we can categorize except by negatives: not eloquent, not syntactically elaborate. We could speak of comparable lyrics by Housman and Hardy, using the term irony to point to Housman's cynical recountings of nature's duplicity, or Hardy's gravely-measured detailings of nature's indifference. At any rate, we say, I know what the poet thinks. With Frost, the possibilities are more disconcertingly open; his anonymity is an invitation for us to rush in and fill the poem with adjectives and attitudes and all the paraphernalia of meaning which it has itself so rigidly refused to make use of. In this poem the poet of the speaking voice, presumably concerned in his work with rendering the subtle and special accents of talk, manages to speak in no particular voice at all and so leaves the reader with something like the response, "Hey, what did he mean by saying that? And what was 'that' anyway?" One of Jarrell's best remarks is about how Frost's best poems make you feel that both optimism and pessimism are hopeful evasions of anything like an adequate response to the strangeness of experience. At any rate, it strikes me that poems like "Out, Out—" and "Neither Out Far Nor In Deep" should be immediately and ultimately not quite understandable, should remain strange by comparison with our ordinary, provisional ways of dealing with life. How could anybody write *King Lear*?, we must finally ask. And so on a slighter but no less real level with Frost's lyrics.

In looking for the lyric which would gather these concerns together and prove my terminal point, though not of terminal desolation, I've chosen one from the volume Frost was writing at the time of his darkest personal trials—the death of his wife and two of his children in the late 1930's:

He thought he kept the universe alone;
For all the voice in answer he could wake
Was but the mocking echo of his own
From some tree-hidden cliff across the lake.

Some morning from the boulder-broken beach
He would cry out on life, that what it wants
Is not its own love back in copy speech,
But counter-love, original response.
And nothing ever came of what he cried
Unless it was the embodiment that crashed
In the cliff's talus on the other side,
And then in the far-distant water splashed,
But after a time allowed for it to swim,
Instead of proving human when it neared
And someone else additional to him,
As a great buck it powerfully appeared,
Pushing the crumpled water up ahead,
And landed pouring like a waterfall,
And stumbled through the rocks with horny tread,
And forced the underbrush—and that was all.

We need go no further than the first line to encounter a distinctive use of language, indeed could spend much time puzzling about what on earth is said in it. "He thought he kept the universe alone." He *thought*? He thought he *kept* (like keeping a farm, keeping to yourself by yourself, it's all his keep)? He thought he kept the universe *alone*. Only the universe—no more than that to be responsible for? Or just a high-sounding way to say that he was lonely? We don't of course pause to sort out these meanings but somehow half-consciously balancing them all in our head proceed, carried along by the verse's impulsion. He "would cry out" for something more than an echo, for "original response." And nothing ever came of his so crying except a crashing embodiment that, through the breathless urgent continuity of a single sentence sustained over twelve lines, powerfully appears as a great buck, pouring like a waterfall, forcing the underbrush. And that was all—that evidently was the most of it.

Is this a visionary lyric in which a lone voice cries out, or dreams something, or wishes for something? But there is no "I," rather a "he," and it is hard to know whether the speaker takes any attitude toward "his" desires and experiences as keeper of the universe. Once more, to use Yeats as a comparison-point: that startling and famous poem "The Second Coming" presents an "I" looking for a way out of chaos and disarray, an "I" who cries that "Surely some

revelation is at hand!/" Surely the Second Coming is at hand!" On which ensues a vision of some terrifying new life to be born. The details of the vision are less important than is the fact that, gathering it all together and taking it in, the speaker concludes the poem by telling us that "The darkness drops again; but now I know/ That twenty centuries of stony sleep . . ." If he knows, then we must know too, as least to the point of standing firm with an order-making intelligence and a will to articulate it, odd as the order made may be. But where do we stand with "The Most of It"? What does it mean to begin a sentence with "Frost believes" or "Frost is saying that"? In a sense this man is as deluded, as naive in his expectations as any of the watchers in "Neither Out Far Nor In Deep." Yet the language presenting his aspiration is elevated and thrilling:

Some morning from the boulder-broken beach
He would cry out on life, that what it wants
Is not its own love back in copy speech,
But counter-love, original response.

There is no snickering at this cry; we are not invited to be superior to the crier. And after all, what he gets, whatever it is, looks like an "original response" as Frost makes with powerful syntax the buck powerfully appear:

Pushing the crumpled water up ahead,
And landed pouring like a waterfall,
And stumbled through the rocks with horny tread,
And forced the underbrush—and that was all.

That was all—that was a good deal—that was a remarkable experience. And he learned from it, we learn from it—what? That in life you get rather more and rather less than you bargained for. A dreary piece of wisdom when so reduced and the buck taken out of it. Yet I don't know how better to formulate the "wisdom" of this poem, and for Frost the poem begins in delight and ends in wisdom. "The fact is the sweetest dream that labor knows", "Mowing" had it, back in the beginning of his poetry. "The Most of It" might be seen as a strange filling-out of that truth, as a celebration of the triumph of fact over "Anything more than the truth"—a

wisdom expressed most concisely in Frost's two-liner called "An Answer":

But Islands of the Blessèd, bless you, son,
I never came upon a blessèd one.

So much for answers: "And nothing ever came of what he cried/ Unless it was the embodiment . . ." That seems to be the most of it, and it seems not very much or not enough only when we attempt to separate it from the poetry, from line following line spoken with attentive urgency, though to the propagation of what exact truth or recommended attitude we cannot say because it will not recommend. The crying-out has to be enough.

There may be some point to not quite leaving it there, though letting Frost have the last word in another way. Here are words from his last letter, dictated from the Boston hospital where it seemed he was recovering, at age eighty-eight, from a heart attack. He writes to a retired professor of English and his wife, whom he'd known at Amherst College:

Oh Roy and Alma:

How the years have come between us. . . . Things have come out fine for you. I'm sorry you don't go to Florida any more but that's a small matter. We read each other's books and we know what we're thinking about. Metaphor is it and the freshness thereof.

The professor, George Roy Elliott, had written thanking Frost for his recent poem sent out at Christmas and titled "The Prophets Really Prophecy as Mystics"; and Frost goes on to speak about salvation, about how Christ posed the problem and died for it: "How can we be just in a world that needs mercy and merciful in a world that needs justice. We study and study the four biographies of Him and are left still somewhat puzzled in our daily lives. Marking students in a kind of mockery and laughing it off. It seems as if I never wrote these plunges into the depths to anyone but you."

Finally he holds out a promise to the Elliotts:

This is being dictated to Anne Morrison Gentry who writes shorthand and her mother Kathleen Morrison who devises all my future. They are helping me through these hard days in a grand and very powerful

hospital. If only I get well, with their help, I'll go deeper into my life with you than I ever have before.

He died soon afterwards, and though the Elliotts mourned for him they need not have mourned that his promise to go deeper into his life with them had not been kept. For this last letter, in all the freshness of its metaphor thereof, is itself like the poems he wrote, one more plunge into the depths. In that sense, and again as with those poems, Frost promised nothing that he didn't perform.

WILLIAM STAFFORD

Stillness Is the Right Wave

At the shore we always choose
one wave by time and place,
and call it best. When it
is over, choose another,
and at the last catch in a cup
a little one to pour on the sand.

Remember how?—it is like dreaming:
listen for the right wave; let
each one tell a story.
Never an end,
never an end.

Window means “wind eye,” but
we forget at home. Some nights a voice
catches up—“Where are we
going?” We remember how
dark among the stars,
how alone in a stall of space
the world is.

All that stillness comes for us
between the waves,
outside the wind’s eye.

A Bird Inside a Box

A bird inside a box, a box will
sing. You put it in a window
for the sun—at first the song
hides, then it calls to everyone.

Every day let loose again, those

faithful notes, they're gone, they're
gone—so many deathless vows—
and songs—and friends.

Young, you tremble. Old, you do
again, in fear. Between, a rock
inside, you hold the wild bird still
like this, in here, in here.

Some Say

A face in the sky, some say, says, "Rain,"
and for that face the word is a deed—
wide, long, gray—that arches
instead of the sky. That's how I'd have
my world, arched outward that way,
being, for miles. I'd say how it is.

But some say they take it back,
that rain is a lie, that even that face
isn't there. I am afraid.
Out in the night I wait, hope for a storm
to save me. Then when it comes, my face
feels it. I take a mouthful, swish
it around for honesty. When I'm sure,
sure, sure, I say, "Rain."

STEPHEN JAMISON

Lucky Palm

Above the pillow
the red targets
of the Lucky Strikes
shine in the dark,
each pack a red moon
taken down in the palm.

The solid shadow
of the bulb seen
in the shade darkens
like a stone,

under the curtain
the pale light drawing
in the room, gray salt
of the long cloth riding,
roughened grain
of the Bible face
like dark salt
opened in his palm.

On the bed when
he will reach it,
the pillow smoothed
to sleep,
the dark flannel shirt,
the sweetness in the collar
taken from the hair.

He rises to the hallway now,
girls seated along
the corridor wearing
red robes in the night,
their shoulders moving

like moons,
and cups held in their lap
like the stone he never sees.

Down the hall
in the shiny machine
the red targets
of the Lucky's rising
in each small lighted
plastic window.

Now he will sit
all evening alone
near his bed, never
ready for sleep, and
if the moon came now
it would settle
in the palm red
or rose-colored,

an image taken
from above the pillow,
red moons of the Lucky pack,
zeroes in the palm,
thin reeds taken out and smoked
in the dark,

the bulb a little cloud
for meditation seen
in the shade
like the stone
he never holds,

as he rises at last now
to the hallway to see
the soft shoulders
of the girls who smoke
and never care,
white cups of nothing
held in the small white
lucky palm.

I Never Took None

Chocolate on their breath,
mint taken from the pantry.
I go out from them
before attendants find me
before police can come
to take me where you go for drugs
and I never took none.

Nighttime lingers in the curtain now,
voices follow from the hall,
each hour a flashlight in the door,
shining on chocolate, on bread
above the pillow,
and I never took none.

When morning comes,
dust of milk and powdered
eggs and raisin flake,
teenagers stay late in bed
and say they never need none.
Earth has called them
in to sleep.
The lounge chair calls,
the day room pack of cards.
From tie dye shirts,
from cigarettes, they come,
and nurses ask them
if they are taking reds
and they say they never take none.

Time to think of the carpet
the lounge chair where you were
make a prayer to moonlight
on the bread like you did
on Sunday in the day room
and Anna there rolling
her button if she had one.

Time to touch a stone,
 or a leaf or branch or flower,
 time to think of where
 you never have none,
 make a prayer if you're going to,
 to trousers, to shirts;
 try to tell them Jesus comes,
 time to say earth is calling you to sleep
 and how you never take none.

RADCLIFFE SQUIRES

Winchester

Reading the engravature
 On the Cathedral floor
 About Jane Austen I become one
 Of her loving survivors who are:
 "Consoled by a firm though humble hope
 That her charity, devotion, faith and purity
 Have rendered her soul acceptable
 In the sight of her redeemer."
 That is exactly where her busy knitting needles meant
 To get. That is exactly the sentiment
 To end the sundries of drawing rooms and tea,
 Which comprise the bliss of her originality.

But in this city of Winchester, just beyond
 The tea cup, just around
 The corner, it is apt to be rather late
 In September, and apt to be raining.
 The cold damp flattens the senile nap of your coat.
 You press against walls that are softly falling

On you like a collapsed lung.
At which moment you hold in your autumn arms
A fossil of summer whose heart is so slowed
That you listen to its music as a child
Suspended in mystic luxury listens to
A music box, nearly run down,
Waiting in the lengthening interval
For one more teased and plectral note.

Jane Austen, John Keats, how much you need
Each other. How much I need you both.

Some Marvelous Quarry

He, walking home from school,
Saw something that looked like a hole
In the February swamp's blurred shoals
Of thawing ice and freezing pools.
And because he had to see what it was
He leapt and slid and fell on bars
Of ice until at last he lay out flat,
His face only a foot
From the mound of a porcupine caught
In the arms of a going and coming winter.
No quill stirred in the wind. The unwary
Eyes gleamed as though fixed on some marvelous quarry.
Had there been stench, he'd have known
It as the stench of death. Had there been
Maggots pumping in their cylinders
Of greed he'd have known it as
The death he knew. But this was changeless,
Perfected, the unmoving shadow of everything
That moves.

At home, of course, he had
To be punished for clothes muddy and wet,
For books spoiled. But since he was one who easily wept,
Even for soft rebukes, his father only played,
Half-smiling, at bringing down the limp belt

On his outstretched hands.
The boy paled but could make no tears.
They looked then, father and son,
At each other with separate fears.
They guessed much, but neither could bear
To believe no punishment would make the boy
Flinch and cry and forget what he now knew.

The Garden of Prometheus

If you travel over high mountains in June
It may well be that, looking down into a glacial cut,
You will see how the ice-giant desperately thrusts
His arms into gullies to hold to hills,
His gray nails scrabbling in the grit, as he falls,
Slowly pulling the world with his somber declension.
Above his strained body drift great birds,
Shimmering ripples in the dark sky-stream,
Uttering those cries that will never be words,
But are the ecstasy pure beyond cause
And are pure lamentation without object.
They skim, wheel beyond him, yet
Return to log the unmaking by day,
The making by night, the check
And glide of the giant's fall as they,
Returning, fall with him, raptors rapt
In the dream's lethargic punctuality.
And you, flowing in the flow you watch,
Will see how the water of agonies wets
A little soil toward which the dream
Progresses. In that small abyss, made by the foot
For the foot to enter, anemones
Blaze briefly; fennel floats its frost-green flame.

There is the garden from which you cannot fall.

IRVING SINGER

Opera as Expression

Notes on the Relation Between Words and Music

NOWADAYS MOST PEOPLE assume that it is the music and not the words that principally determine an opera's aesthetic value. One writer even asserts that "when words enter into music they are no longer prose or poetry, they are elements of the music."¹ Mozart probably thought the same. In one of the letters to his father, he emphatically states that "in an opera the poetry must be altogether the obedient daughter of the music."² But if one holds this position, one can only be baffled by attitudes that prevailed at other times. For instance, in his *Preface to Alceste* Gluck advocated quite a different relationship between words and music. As Gluck puts it, "I sought to restrict music to its true function, namely to serve the poetry by means of the expression—and the situations which make up the plot—without interrupting the action or diminishing its interest by useless or superfluous ornament."³

These two attitudes are usually thought to be contradictory. They would seem to voice incompatible generalizations about the very nature of opera, its aesthetic structure and inherent being as an art form. And certainly these statements of Gluck and Mozart are relevant to different *kinds* of operas. But possibly opera in general can encompass both varieties. For clearly Mozart is not advocating "useless and superfluous ornament" in the music; and it is significant that Gluck wants music to serve poetry "by means of the expression." Gluck is trying to eliminate musical elements that diminish an opera's dramatic power. Mozart is trying to exclude

¹ Susanne K. Langer, *Feeling and Form* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1953) p. 150.

² *The Letters of Mozart and His Family*, Vol. II, ed. by Emily Anderson (New York: Macmillan, 1966) p. 773.

³ Reprinted in *The Essence of Opera*, ed. by Ulrich Weisstein (New York: W. W. Norton, 1969) p. 106. Previously, Monteverdi had also said: "Let the text be the master of the music, not its servant." Cf. Reinhard G. Pauly, *Music and the Theater* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1970) p. 55.

literary effects that cannot be articulated in music and therefore subvert its expressiveness.

One could thus argue that the question of priority is not as important as either Gluck or Mozart may have thought. In all essentials the two may really agree. Composers often talk about their art as if there were no way of practicing it other than the one that they themselves pursue. For each of them, creating from his own perspective, this may well be true. What serves as convincing autobiography, however, need not be taken as universal aesthetics.

Similar considerations apply to the contradictions that would seem to separate Wagner from Stravinsky. Wishing to synthesize the thesis of Gluck with the antithesis of Mozart, Wagner formulated a notion of music drama in which poetry and musical expression would undergo an "inner blending." Though Wagner seems to have vacillated about the relative importance to be given words or music, he constantly envisaged the writing of operas which would match these elements as ingredients that merge with one another. One might immediately remark that Gluck and Mozart also sought a perfect blending between words and music. But it was Wagner that Stravinsky and other neo-classicists reacted against in writing works that sought to *separate* words and music, treating them as elements that were to retain their independence instead of melting together. In choosing Latin for *Oedipus Rex*, Stravinsky reports that he no longer felt "dominated by the phrase, the literal meaning of the words." He claims to have emancipated himself from the words as anything but "purely phonetic material." Far from thinking of the text as an alter ego with which his music should merge organically, the composer could now "dissect it at will and concentrate all his attention on its primary constituent element—that is to say, on the syllable."⁴

Wagner advocated his approach as a way of revealing an underlying unity of feeling which characterized reality, and Stravinsky defends his method as an austere style that prevents music from falling into sentimentalism. Properly understood, each of them is right in what he says and what he does. For their doing is the creation of works of art, and their saying is part of the self-assertion which gives one the courage to create one's own kind of art. Taken as aesthetics, however, their statements are inaccurate and

⁴ Igor Stravinsky, *An Autobiography* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1962) p. 128.

possibly harmful. One could very well argue that the distance which Stravinsky enforces—for instance, by having Jocasta's proud speech sound hootchy-kootchy rather than regal—involves its own kind of merging between words and music. The effect may not be sentimental, and it may even seem cynical when compared with Wagner's romanticism, but it too depends upon musical expression. It is more than just the abstract use of phonetic material.

Once we see that these contrary theories have misled composers, as well as audiences, we may discover ways in which their insights can be harmonized. The earliest term for opera was *dramma per musica*, and it is the word *per* that may provide the basis for agreement. For all the different theories of opera recognize the importance of presenting drama *through* the music, by means of it, and therefore by virtue of musical expressiveness. It is in this capacity of music to express both ideas and feelings that we shall find the distinctive characteristics of opera.

I will not be saying much about non-dramatic music. Abstract music, like abstract painting, expresses fragmentary and indeterminate feelings. The intricate designs to which these feelings contribute are quite different from what one finds in works of art that explicitly depict human events. In the opera, music is "applied," in the sense that it has a function within a dramatic totality. Each mood, feeling, emotion expressed in the music pertains—either directly or indirectly—to the enactment of human situations. One might also say that the abstract in music becomes vital or lived, inasmuch as its expressiveness is now used to portray the flow and fluctuation of some presented experience. While also being enjoyable to the ear, music in the opera concentrates upon just those sound patterns which are able to portray and even magnify the affective universe through which human beings confront one another.

In this regard, consider the famous letter in which Mozart describes his music for *The Abduction from the Seraglio*. After mentioning that he has written the music for Osmin with a certain performer in mind, one whose voice was renowned for its excellence in the lower bass range, Mozart describes how he makes Osmin's rage into something comical. He says that this effect will be achieved by giving Osmin's aria in the first act an accompaniment of Turkish

music—in other words, by creating an incongruity between the enraged intensity of the vocal line and the tinkling playfulness in the orchestra. But also, Osmin's rage is expressed in a way that divests him of his dignity and causes him to appear ridiculous. In showing how the music does this, Mozart writes to his father as follows:

The passage "Drum beim Barte des Propheten" is indeed in the same tempo, but with quick notes; but as Osmin's rage gradually increases, there comes (just when the aria seems to be at an end) the allegro assai, which is in a totally different measure and in a different key; this is bound to be very effective. For just as a man in such a towering rage oversteps all the bounds of order, moderation, and propriety and completely forgets himself, so must the music too forget itself. But as passions, whether violent or not, must never be expressed in such a way as to excite disgust, and as music, even in the most terrible situations, must never offend the ear, but must please the hearer, or, in other words, must never cease to be *music*, I have gone from F (the key in which the aria is written), not into a remote key, but into a related one, not, however, into its nearest relative D minor, but into the more remote A minor. (his italics)⁵

Mozart is here describing some of the means by which expressive music portrays human emotion and therefore human reality. The relationship between the music and what it depicts is not especially mimetic, for there is only a limited attempt to copy actual sounds. Osmin's voice goes up and down just as it would if he were an angry man in the real world, and his quick notes duplicate the agitated sound of an authentic rage; but the expressiveness of Mozart's music consists in more than imitation alone. It primarily results from the use of auditory signs which function in a metaphoric rather than a literal manner. There is nothing in actual anger which corresponds *directly* to a change in key. Yet in changing keys, Mozart is doing something to the music which suggests a parallel change in the condition of the man. Like an enraged person, the music loses control, "oversteps all the bounds of order, moderation, and propriety." Music does this by violating harmonic and tonal conventions, which is not at all the same as having a tantrum. Going from the key of F into one that is more or less remote is only figuratively similar to the improper manifestation of

⁵ *The Letters of Mozart and His Family*, Vol. II, p. 769.

aggressive emotions. The former expresses the latter, however, because both deviate from norms of acceptability.

Though these norms are not the same, one dealing with music and the other with manners, they are alike in deriving from recognized conventions. Once we intuit the governing metaphor, we have no difficulty in perceiving the operative effect. Through the drama we see Osmin being angry and through the mimetic properties of the music—the loudness, the rapidity, the stamping sounds—we know that it too is portraying his anger. From the relationships between tempi, rhythms, key changes, etc., we then infer those nuances of character that Osmin's anger expresses.

It is because the expressiveness of music goes beyond its mimetic capacity that Mozart can freely choose between related and remote keys. His decision determines the nature of his metaphors; it is more than just a means of protecting tonal sensibilities in his audience. Later composers have been more daring about the making of unpleasant noises. But whether it shocks or soothes the listener, an opera's ability to express human feelings will always depend on the metaphors it formulates rather than on attempts to duplicate sounds.

Berlioz makes a similar point in his essay on "The Limits of Music." In discussing musical imitation of physical reality, he lays down four conditions for its proper employment: first, that imitation of this sort shall never be an end but only a means—never the main musical idea but only a complement to it; second, that imitation should be limited only to phenomena particularly worthy of attention; third, that imitation should be precise enough to avoid misconception; and fourth, that "physical imitation shall never occur in the very spot where *emotional* imitation (expressiveness) is called for, and thus encroach with descriptive utilities when the drama is proceeding apace and passion alone deserves a voice." (his italics)⁶

Berlioz illustrates this last limitation by citing a momentary lapse in Beethoven's *Fidelio*. While Leonore and Rocco are digging the grave in Act II, they encounter a large rock and have to roll it aside. In a figure for the double basses of the orchestra, Beethoven imitates the dull sound of the stone being rolled. Berlioz calls this imitation "a sad piece of childishness." His judgment may be too

⁶ Reprinted in *Pleasures of Music*, ed. by Jacques Barzun (New York: Viking, 1951) p. 245.

severe, but of greater importance is the reason that he gives for making such a judgment. He says that imitation is here an end in itself; it contributes "no poetry, no drama, no truth." In short, it is mere copying and therefore lacks the expressive power that might have been achieved through imaginative use of musical metaphors.

In his letter about Osmin and the way in which his rage has been expressed, Mozart remarks that the music was composed before any words had been written. He makes it very clear that he was not setting music to words but rather getting Stephanie (the librettist) to write the words that he needed for this aria. Mozart says this in the same mood in which he speaks of poetry as the obedient daughter of the music. But as far as expressiveness is concerned, it does not matter what gets written first, nor even whether the composer has written the words himself. For obviously Mozart had in mind—from the very outset—some dramatic characterization which was to be conveyed by the right words in relation to the right music. Even Gluck would not have suggested that a composer submit to just *any* words that are presented by his librettist. They must always be words that will further the ultimate aim of expression. Where they come from, or when, is immaterial.

Similarly, it would be a mistake to think that the expressiveness of operatic music can be appreciated without the words. To listen to an opera for the music alone is like listening to a foreign language that one does not know, hoping to understand what is being said by watching the accompanying gestures and body movements. Certainly these are an important part of the communication, and one can also admit that music in an opera is *more* important than mere gestures in a spoken language; but the fact remains that opera is a type of dramatic performance which cannot be fully appreciated unless one understands its verbal impact.

In saying this, one need not deny that great poetry is usually detrimental to great opera. Various theorists have pointed out that vocal music requires a concentration upon musical sounds which is defeated by the mental processes that must be directed towards the best poetry. W. H. Auden even speaks of the ideal libretto as a "private letter" that the librettist addresses to the composer rather than the public.⁷ In part, at least, Auden means that the words

⁷ W. H. Auden, "Notes on Music and Opera," in *The Dyer's Hand, and other essays* (New York: Random House, 1962) p. 473.

must not seek to be interesting in themselves, as they would if they aspired to poetic excellence, but only as a vehicle for musical enjoyment. In my opinion, Auden's formulation is confused. Though the words in an opera do have importance only as they enable the audience to perceive what is being expressed by music, they are far from being a private communication to the composer. They must be understood, and even savored, by the audience if it is to appreciate how the composer uses them for the sake of musical expression. Of course, one could *refuse* to take an interest in the words, as if one were listening to a concert. But then one would not be having the experience of an opera. Aesthetically there would be something wrong, as there is with all works of art when one fails to respond to the complexities of their particular medium.

It is sometimes said that the music in an opera stands to the words in a similar relationship as poetry to prose. There is a measure of truth in this. One need only imagine a prose version of Shakespearian lines on the one hand, and an operatic version on the other, to detect how music resembles poetry in adding expressiveness to ordinary language. Try the experiment with the following:

Full fathom five thy father lies;
Of his bones are coral made;

Those are pearls that were his eyes;
Nothing of him that doth fade
But doth suffer a sea-change
Into something rich and strange.

(*The Tempest*, I, ii)

There are many prose versions which might communicate a comparable meaning as effectively as Shakespeare's lines. They would be inferior, however, in their ability to express that welter of elusive feelings which the poetry exquisitely conveys. By means of alliteration, rhyme, meter, and other formal devices, the lines suggest a regularity of structure in nature itself, an orderliness that may even govern disasters such as drowning. One feels that this cosmic order may arise from intelligence and possibly prescience, as in the making of poetry itself, and therefore that this occurrence of death is meaningful and not absurd. There is even the suggestion

of a beautiful outcome to the event, eyes turning into priceless jewels by some agency of artlike creativity. At the same time, a sense of mystery, a feeling of wonderment, lingers in these lines. What to us is hideous in nature takes on an uncanny loveliness once it is subsumed under aesthetic imagination. Poetry is able to achieve this special expressiveness partly because it prevents us from speaking the lines (or hearing them in our inward ear) with the flatness of insignificant discourse. The lines must be intoned, voiced as tonal vehicles, enunciated for that play of vowels and consonants which adds a musical dimension to what would otherwise be meaningful but only prosaic.

Without limiting ourselves to actual vocal or operatic versions of Shakespeare's lines, we can easily imagine how different songs would express a variety of feelings relevant to them. One might accentuate the loveliness, another the mystery, still another the sense of prearranged orderliness, and so on. As in poetry, the vocal music goes beyond prose in its capacity to express feelings vividly and explicitly. But musical versions differ from the poetic in having a larger range of tonal effects which tend to *magnify* the element of expressiveness. It is as if each of the affective components in the poetry—the emotions, the feelings, the rudimentary sensations—were enlarged for the sake of emphasis and immediate recognition. This, I think, is the reason why great poetry does not lend itself to the making of great libretti. Either the poetry would be distorted by the process of magnification, or else the music would have to strain for conceptual effects that are too precise—too minute and even too delicate—for it to express.⁸

This disparity between poetic and musical expression also accounts for that special affinity to the stage which opera has. We often feel that reading Shakespeare in private can yield an aesthetic experience which a staged performance may possibly fail to provide. For the poetry can be read at home as well as heard in the theatre, and often with greater understanding. Poetic effects can always distract one from what is happening on stage, and what is happening offstage can always deflect one's attention from the intricacies of poetry. With the opera, all this is quite different. What happens may be more remote from ordinary life than in verse drama, since people rarely sing themselves through emotional situations, and therefore operatic presentations must always run the

⁸ On opera as magnification, cf. Leonard Bernstein, "What Makes Opera Grand?", in *The Joy of Music* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1959) pp. 266-303.

risk of appearing ridiculous. But no one would think of reading an opera in the way in which we read a verse play. The opera *has* to be performed. Even when we listen to a recording or a broadcast on the radio, we project ourselves into an imagined performance. The magnification and even grossness in opera's mode of expression results from the theatrical context which it always presupposes. If only because it is louder, it covers the stage and pervades the theatre in a way that verse drama cannot. This is the aesthetic opportunity of opera; and in art, an opportunity is always a justification.

T.S. Eliot thought that poetic and musical expression both differ from prose in their ability to take us "beyond the namable, classifiable emotions and motives of our conscious life when directed towards action."⁹ To say this, however, is to suggest that feelings belong to at least two categories: one pertaining to the world of action, and the other being a fringe that we become aware of, as Eliot says, in a "temporary detachment from action." Doubtless some such distinction can be made, for there are innumerable ways in which feelings may be analyzed, and no matter how we define "action" and "detachment from action" they will surely involve different kinds of feeling. Nevertheless, no distinction of this sort can do the work that Eliot intended. Poetry and music are alike in vividly articulating feelings or emotions that prose might fail to emphasize; but the feelings and emotions themselves are not necessarily of a different kind. On the contrary, prose turns into poetry once the feelings in our ordinary life are given a linguistic expression that does articulate them vividly. And when music carries the process further, it merely provides a different means of presentation. The feelings and the emotions need not be those that belong to a psychic fringe or peculiar state of detachment. They are the same affective responses that occur throughout our active life—feelings precisely of the sort that a biologist or psychologist would find characteristic of man's existence in his environment. They are not themselves special; they are merely treated in a special way and elicited within the special situations of poetic or musical expressiveness.

Opera is often maligned as an "impure" art, and of course it is a *mixed* art. But its purity—that is, its excellence as an art form—consists in its ability to supplement the expressive inadequacies of

⁹ T. S. Eliot, *Poetry and Drama* (Cambridge: Harvard, 1951) p. 42.

language by means of music while also supplementing the conceptual inadequacies of music by means of language, both elements being controlled by the necessities of the drama. This does not mean that opera is aesthetically better than either unaccompanied music or unaccompanied language. It only means that it does something different. D. F. Tovey argues that even the expression of emotions can be more powerful in abstract music than in the opera, where one has to put up with the machinery of the stage and all those theatrical make-shifts needed to get characters into position for the singing of an aria. But the examples that Tovey gives, a moment in a Brahms quartet or a Beethoven sonata, are instances where music expresses emotions in a way that is simply foreign to the opera.¹⁰ What, then, is the value of Tovey's comparison? Disputing that one form of music is more powerful, has more "emotional force," than the other seems to me less rewarding than recognizing that each is a *different* way of expressing emotions. I suspect that artistic success depends upon the composer's genius within his chosen medium rather than an absolute ranking among the media themselves. And in fact when Tovey talks about Mozart's achievement in his operas, he never suggests that the imperfections of musical drama prevented Mozart from writing great expressive music there as elsewhere.

As opposed to critics like Tovey, some writers have thought that only in dramatic works can emotions be adequately expressed by music. One can see why they may have taken this extreme position. In symphonic or chamber music expressive elements are present but not clearly related to emotions as we encounter them in ordinary life. In an oratorio the music generally expresses feelings for the sake of underlining a message. In a single song, or even a song cycle, the music expresses individual moods, possibly a succession of them, but we do not see emotions acted out, portrayed before us by actors in a scene. The performing of emotions is more readily available to the dramatic imagination, and consequently to the opera as a dramatic phenomenon. What the composer loses in having to make do with the exigencies of the theatre, he regains by having human beings in lifelike circumstances as instruments that supplement the ones in the orchestra. In life we all have within us, as Hamlet says, that which passeth show—emotions that we cannot express fully and that conventional society hardly recognizes. In the opera, however, dramatic personages shriek their anger and

¹⁰D. F. Tovey, *The Main Stream of Music, and other essays* (New York: Oxford, 1949) p. 173.

scream their joy. They do so in sounds that are not only expressive but also socially acceptable. For now they belong to the domain of music as well as life.

Operas are to the modern world as Greek tragedies, which also contained musical elements, were to the ancient. In none of the other arts do the feelings of men and women exhibit themselves with the same mixture of publicity and privacy. For though the opera exposes affective impulses that everyday life obscures, it also hides their detailed idiosyncrasies through the sheer abstractness of musical sound. I think this is the kernel of truth in that line from Schopenhauer which is often quoted. Music, he says, "does not express a particular and definite joy, sorrow, anguish, delight, or peace of mind, but joy, sorrow, anguish, delight, peace of mind *themselves*, in the abstract, in their essential nature, without accessories, and therefore without their customary motives" (his italics).¹¹ By expressing emotions which are specific in the drama but only generic in the music, the opera enables its audience as well as the characters to undergo a series of inchoate and ambiguous catharses that need never recognize their actual origins.

In *Don Giovanni* there is a moment in which Mozart and Da Ponte seem to affirm something to this effect. In Act I Scene 3 Don Giovanni, Donna Elvira, Don Ottavio, and Donna Anna attest to the expressive nature of music when they jointly sing of "a feeling of unknown anguish" that intimates a hundred things of which it cannot speak. Elvira mentions "anger, fury, spite, fear," but we know that even these general terms are too specific. The anguished feelings pertain to what is happening in the plot, of course; but also the characters are commenting upon their sheer capacity to express emotions *per musica*. While explicating their feelings, they are also referring to the condition of every personage in an opera. As a recent critic states: "For eighteen bars (9.31-49) they all pay tribute to the power of music to mean what words cannot say."¹² And through this expressiveness, the music leads us in the audience to suspend our disbelief, our sense of doubt or separateness from the action on stage. It washes over everything that induces scepticism. Where the emotive impact is so strong and the auditory sensations so beguiling, how can we withhold assent? How can we resist this magical unification of entities as different as words and music?

¹¹*The World as Will and Representation*, Vol. I, #52.

¹²Robert Moberly, *Three Mozart Operas* (New York: Dodd, Mead, 1968) p. 187.

JUDITH JOHNSON SHERWIN

Watching the Night

lately it has seemed to me	
	the full moon round and feathered like an owl
as if I'll never live to be a fat old woman in a tree	hunched over
under me and dust whistlebone	to fill the branches with plucked out down remains of small animals
how i'd hone while i'd puff up slip and whistle and call and	that moon down crescent holler and hoot the
cold oak hollow faithfully until i bust.	of lust the whole night full

Out and In

quick fish, flickering fish
you blink of the world's eye
when will you move
easily in me

no crazy flapping
on a hook in the heart
but smooth
a seam drawn alive
under the lake's skin

DAVID RAY

Stopping by the Roadside in Indiana Hills

At least a place to breathe for a space,
view of that valley, little stream,
grey barn for horses, breath
off the hills,
snow on dried st. anne's lace,
a ruined house, broken jugs,
rusted child's train
and a track, twisted now,
a real train he had
up here in the hills,
all his own, pedaling furiously.
And the International Harvester
truck grill with its one headlight
stands in its elegance in grass
saying This is what happened
to us. . . Ah, we were happy here!
I can feel it against the blackberry
limbs, ice frozen along the tips.
And the planks of the floor
are twisted like the lips of the dead.
I am alone here for ten minutes,
alone, alone,

to the end of the world,
and more a part of these vanished
strangers
than of my own life
which I resume, crouching
like that child of the Thirties.

Every Time I Run into Arnie

Arnie says "It was beautiful
seeing you eighteen and just out of
bed with the girl you loved
who'd been a freckled virgin
till a few days before
and the way you told about it so
purely, how the first time was
near the ocean, it reminded me
of my own old self,"
so that tears came into his eyes
and he remembered his own
innocence, stolen now
by a remorseless world
that crushed his violinist's hands
and left him driving cabs
and as he says this so many years later
as I run into him again
on the street, how touched he was
by my purity
I cannot even imagine what it is
he is talking about, I am so far
from my self, that was more my self
than what I am now,
but I am too out of touch with that self
to weep.

RICHARD L. KENNEY

Entries in a Ship's Log

MILFORD HAVEN

I watched a plough one sun-shot morning in late
March; in new grass ruffled and shimmering as a parrot
there dropped, dug, three share blades
that shucked back the green field like oxblood.
A life-spill raw as manure, crawling with larvae
and rooting seed cotyledons, the slit soil
was a grand banks; the breeze was over the sea,
and then St. George's Channel pitched up gulls.
A little while I watched them daubing down
and up, a whirl and white gust of petals,
mud-marked, flocking sails. I thought of home, then.
I walked until dusk, that Sunday. By then the whole
field was grey, the gulls gone. The channel
was milk-grey, overcast; the sky was like whalebone.

ABERYSTWYTH

A grey jade stone race of whitecapped
waves from the Irish Sea overleapt
the wide-chested breakwater slabs
in a gale-force wind, all yesterday.
This late forenoon a lazy breeze raked
brittle black curls of sun-dried
seaweed on the broad walkway
of the Aberystwyth Promenade.
A pastel limewashed town as Mediterranean
as British, almost; the river quick in the Rheidol
Vale, Welsh hillsides green as Ireland. Llewellyn
the Last Prince died like high color from a face;
the blown weed rustled, dry as beetle shell,
smooth as a dead Roman carapace.

KATHRYN STRIPLING

Cornwalking

This summer because of so little cleared ground
we have only two rows at the edge
of the garden. And yet
even now when I kneel to pick beans
I can hear the corn whisper, "Hither come,
hither come," so I put down my basket

and walk the short rows
pretending it's Georgia midsummer
and the corn at my grandfather's farm's
fit to lose myself in

as I did a few times, losing sight
of all fences
and cousins
and stalking straight out of this world
down the streets of the corn kingdom,
sassy and satisfied,
twining its green worms around my heart's finger
for luck in love, kicking up dirt
for the smell of it. Cornblossom Maiden

I was, with the corn itch
and squirt of the kernel in both eyes
from testing a ripe ear. So what did I care
if a thundercloud crept from the forest
and waited for me to come out
again? Neither my cousins
nor my grandmother ringing the bell in the backyard
for me to come home on the double

could find me once
I reached the middle of three thousand corn rows
to sing at the top of my lungs
with the gathering wind in the corn itself
singing, "We are growing everywhere.
What is the world but our song?"

JOHN SIMON

Theatre Chronicle

IN FEBRUARY 1912, André Gide noted in his journal:

[Ghéon] m'entraîne passer la soirée au Théâtre des Arts où l'on donne la première de la *Profession de Madame Warren*. J'arrivais tout hérissé, indisposé d'avance par l'insupportable immodestie de l'auteur. Et les premières scènes ont dépassé mon attente; on n'imagine rien de plus revêche, de plus sec, de plus abstrait. Mais, au second acte, je me suis laissé séduire sans plus songer à la résistance (il est vrai de dire que l'actrice était excellente, qui jouait Mme Warren). Je me suis ressaisi vers la fin du troisième acte. Il est fâcheux que le quatrième soit si mauvais. Quel art grimaçant et quelles grinçantes pensées!

Then comes the following one-line paragraph: "Pas pu m'endormir avant l'aube." Was that ordinary insomnia or the aftereffect of Bernard Shaw's "grating thoughts"?

Sixty-four Februarys later, I find myself equally divided about *Mrs. Warren's Profession*, though the production mounted by Joseph Papp at the Vivian Beaumont Theater in Lincoln Center and directed by Gerald Freedman is virtually calculated to intensify one's dichotomy about the play. In 1893, at the age of 37, Shaw was still a dramatic tyro. Behind him were novels, criticism, and other writings, but only two plays, of which one began as a collaboration with William Archer. All three of these early plays sagged under the influence of Ibsen, but an Archerized Ibsen who seemed to have written social tracts and thesis plays in a pallid, conventional language. So in *Mrs. Warren's Profession* the theme was to be a muckraking one: Vivie Warren, fresh out of Cambridge, learns that her impoverished, abused mother had been driven into prostitution, whence she worked her way up to becoming co-owner of an international chain of brothels. Vivie can forgive her mother's becoming a prostitute, but not her turning capitalist exploiter of other prostitutes. So disgusted is Vivie by a world in which one or another kind of mass enslavement is the basis for the well-being of the privileged few that she renounces men, marriage, her mother, and chooses to become first an actuary and eventually a lawyer, so as to immerse herself in honest and humanitarian work.

The play functions on three levels. There is, first, the dramatic-pathetic confrontation of Mrs. Warren, the mercenary whoremistress full of noble Victorian pieties, and Vivie, the seemingly genteel young lady, who should now devote herself to her mother, culture, the arts, and, finally, a husband and children, but who will have none of these. Though both characters are paradoxical, Shaw is not yet able to extract the full comic effect of the paradoxes along with their shock value. On the play's second level, we get the emergence of the New Woman as Vivie rejects three men: the ruthless Sir George Crofts, Mrs. Warren's former client and present business

partner as well as, presumably, lover, who would marry the girl, enjoy his autumnal years with her (perhaps including her mother in a *ménage à trois*), then leave her a handsomely provided-for widow; twenty-year-old Frank Gardner, Vivie's Cantabrigian puppy love—good-looking, charming, and insolent—who wants to marry and live off Vivie while also having an eye for her mother; and Praed, a decent enough, middle-aged architect, who wants to initiate Vivie in the art treasures of the Continent and, apparently, though he is extremely discreet about it, other things as well. But this feminine self-assertion remains dryer, less dazzlingly persuasive, than in the later plays.

In the Vivie-Mrs. Warren scenes, the ability to make rival ideologies clash and score points off each other regardless of where Shaw's own preferences lie is impressive; in the scenes between Vivie and her suitors, there is some good, sharp debunking of social, sexual, and cultural shibboleths. But a discrepancy creeps in: the predominantly emotional mother-daughter scenes are in a different tonal register from those of what I have called the second level, which are wryer, more ironic. The discrepancy becomes jarring when we reach the play's third level, the downright comic scenes involving the social and sexual irresponsibilities of Frank Gardner, or the doltish bumbling of his father, the Reverend Samuel Gardner, who is revealed to be Vivie's father without benefit of the clergy, to which he so uneasily belongs. These scenes are not joined seamlessly to the graver matters.

The very quality of the writing is inconsistent; Gide was, I think, right about the insufficiency of the first and fourth acts, the former a kind of protracted prologue, the latter, though not exactly an epilogue, still a rather mechanistic way of ticking off unfinished business, and an almost proleptic vision of Vivie's future. The play even contains a lapse in logic: in Act III, the elder Gardner asks his son in the rectory garden, "Do you think the Warrens will expect to be asked here after yesterday afternoon?" Indeed, Mrs. Gardner and her daughter have left for London, apparently to avoid just such a scandalous confrontation. But, as Acts I and II stand, nothing much happened "yesterday afternoon" to make Kitty and Vivie Warren *personae non gratae* in the most proper circles. To be sure, Kitty indignantly reprimanded Crofts for wanting to marry her daughter, but there were no witnesses to this small flare-up; the great revelation scene between Vivie and her mother takes place not in the afternoon but in the evening, and, once again, without witnesses.

This is not, however, a serious inconsistency, and all the characters, with the possible exception of Praed, are well enough drawn. Sir George Crofts is perhaps a shade too closely modeled on Ibsen's Judge Brack—*Hedda Gabler* was published in English and performed in London in 1891, two years before Shaw started work on *Mrs. Warren*. When Brack smirkingly envisions becoming a regular at the Tesmans—in fact, "the only cock of the yard," having, as he thinks, blackmailed Hedda into becoming his mistress—he says to the husband and wife, "Don't you worry, we'll have fine times here together." When Sir George con-

templates marriage to Vivie and, most likely, something a bit beyond it, he says to Mrs. Warren, "We three could live together very comfortably." Yet even Crofts is already a thoroughly Shavian delineation of the successful scoundrel, a precursor of more fully fleshed out figures like Boss Mangan and Andrew Undershaft. In fact, only Praed remains a mere "sentimental artist" with not much personality. Disgusted with his fellow drama reviewers, Shaw was to write in the preface to the play, "Fool that I was not to make [him] a theatre critic instead of an architect!" Still, even Praed has his moments of Shavian wit, as when, about to take the Warrens on a tour to show off the finer points of the Reverend Gardner's freshly restored thirteenth-century church, he remarks, "if the restoration has left any to shew." *Shew*, you will recall, is Shaw's unrestored spelling of *show*.

Certainly the characters of Kitty and Vivie Warren are delights. We can't help admiring Kitty when she advises her daughter: "The only way for a woman to provide for herself decently is for her to be good to some man that can afford to be good to her. If she's in his own station in life, let her make him marry her; but if she's far beneath him she cant [sic] expect it: why should she? it wouldnt be for her own happiness." And how delectably sensible is Vivie, who answers her mother's, "My God, what sort of a woman are you?" with a cool, "The sort the world is mostly made of, I should hope. Otherwise I dont understand how it gets its business done." All that a production of *Mrs. Warren* needs is a sure-fire Kitty and Vivie, whereupon it must work at least in part. Alas, in Joseph Papp's revival it gets a superb Vivie in Lynn Redgrave and an appalling Kitty in Ruth Gordon. Even Miss Redgrave's excellence proves saddening as one watches it being wasted on a production irredeemably infected by Miss Gordon's presence, which definitely makes Shaw's art *grimaçant* and his utterances *gringantes*.

Kitty Warren is supposed to be between forty and fifty, with remnants of former beauty. Miss Gordon is somewhere around eighty-five, and looks like a small puppet with its head made out of a dried apple. She moves somewhat jerkily and as little as possible, often affecting a fake grandeur that, from her, comes out as fishwifely arrogance. Even her tininess, in juxtaposition with the statuesque Miss Redgrave, works against any shred of just balance in the contest. Yet the full magnitude of the catastrophe becomes manifest only when she starts speaking in a funny, croaking little voice with strongly Jewish inflections (although neither Mrs. Warren nor Miss Gordon is Jewish!), breaking up lines into quixotic cola, muttering inaudibly much of the time, and generally affecting the mannerisms of certain vaudeville comedians: a kind of pugnacious vocal swagger, in which the utterance lurches about like an insolent novice skater. When she is supposed to burst into tears, Miss Gordon cannot even fake it; worse yet, she continually reads lines meant to be serious, or even pathetic, for laughs. Thus in reply to Vivie's question whether, if they were still poor, she wouldn't after all prefer sending her daughter to a sweatshop than to a brothel, she exclaims, "Of course not. What sort of a mother do you take me for?"—but she does it, not with the genuine

indignation that would prove Shaw's radical sociology, but with a smirking condescension that merely gets a cheap laugh from the audience. And so does most of her performance, which our civilized opening-nighters lapped up and laughed up in all the wrong places, finally rewarding it with an ovation far surpassing the polite hand accorded Miss Redgrave.

The latter, however, is a prodigious Vivie. She displays here a wonderful toughness that in no way negates the underlying innocence and even vulnerability; her brusqueness of speech and gesture is felt to be based on the very mathematical prowess she exhibited at Cambridge, which tells her that a decisive gesture and direct talk are the social equivalents of the straight line that is the shortest distance between two points. The actress has exquisite timing and an ironic intonation, curling some of her final syllables the way, one twirls the tip of one's moustache. Even her face, rather than being pretty, has a no-nonsense cleanness to it, a staunch angularity on which one can depend. Her frame, though large, moves with an efficiency that is a kind of metasexual allure. And yet I wonder: why did Shaw make this young woman opt for a program of all work and no sex, marital or otherwise?

In the area of sexuality, Shaw always leaves me a mite uncomfortable; even Gide's *grincant* may have something to do with that discomfort. To be sure, one could assume that her mother's life has so traumatized Vivie that she no longer wants to have anything to do with sexuality. But there is more to it: Shaw seems to applaud her decision; he does not seem to consider it a perhaps understandable but unhealthy reaction. And given who Mrs. Warren and her much-wooed daughter are, we would expect their agon, which runs through the play, to revolve around questions of love, sex, and marriage. It hardly does. One reason for this may be that Shaw was scrupulously avoiding anything that would enable the Lord Chamberlain or others to perceive this as a sexual and, therefore, immoral play; but the main reason, I am sure, is that Shaw was interested in prostitution as a social evil, and brothel-keeping as a form of capitalist exploitation symbolic of all other forms. Hence the debate centers on money—whether Vivie can accept her mother's ill-gotten gains and, concomitantly, the way of life that comes with them. Emotional issues must, accordingly, remain subordinate.

Nevertheless, the political-moral question is argued with great emotional and intellectual force by both women, and Shaw, to repeat, does not readily tip the scales in favor of Vivie's and his own social, or socialist, sympathies; instead, he allows the capitalistic Mrs. Warren—and even her cynical and corrupt cohort, Sir George Crofts—a number of pertinent, or at least deft, arguments. It is imperative, then, for the two leading actresses to be evenly matched; with Ruth Gordon's ludicrous playing, however, the balance is destroyed. Shockingly, though, the audience still managed to side up—as the laughter and applause made abundantly clear—not with the in every way superior Miss Redgrave, but with the repellantly crowd-pleasing Miss Gordon—indeed, I suspect, with the position of the outraged mother, which is all they got from Mrs. Warren.

It was impossible to come away from the Beaumont that night without a sense of despair for the New York theatergoers, and for the cause of decent theater itself. What I found particularly distressing were the snickers that greeted Shaw's stratagem of not naming Mrs. Warren's profession, only having a character scribble it on a piece of paper and letting implication do the rest. Granted that what was once deemed necessary to get the play licensed—all in vain, for it was denied a public performance in Britain for some thirty years—may seem unduly prudish by today's standards. But how ignorant and stupid to respond to this touching, desperate stratagem with patronizing laughter.

Gerald Freedman, the director, has a certain knack for farce, and a propensity to turn even productions of, say, *The Tempest* or *King Lear*, unwisely entrusted to him, into plays leaning heavily toward the farcical. In the present case, he did not stage the play too broadly, but he did allow Miss Gordon to perform at her slatternliest, so contributing to making a shambles of the evening. In all fairness, though, we must wonder whether anyone could have toned down Miss Gordon, who has been capitalizing on the old-witch-with-Jewish-overtones persona ever since I can remember. Yet already in 1578 John Lyly sagely pronounced about such acting in his *Euphues*: "He that playeth one part bringeth loathsomeness to the ear. It is variety that moveth the mind of all men." The New York drama critics, usually polite to a fault, were this time for the most part uneuphemistic about their disapproval; even Clive Barnes, that notorious hedger, waxed astoundingly emphatic: "Ruth Gordon is absolutely deplorable as Mrs. Warren. She resorts to cheap comic effects, her voice is as monotonous as a subway, and her style is nonexistent." All the same, there were a few reviewers who lived up to tradition: "High credit to the stellar ladies," wired William Glover over the AP wire service; and Jeffrey Lyons, the son of the late gossip columnist, hotted up the airwaves over CBS radio by declaring Ruth Gordon "magnificent." Pia Lindstrom was no less enthusiastic over NBC-TV, although, as the daughter of Ingrid Bergman, she may have special reasons for handouts to aging actresses.

More interesting than any of these were the utterances of Joseph Papp when I inquired during intermission whose idea it was to cast Miss Gordon. "Mine," boomed Papp Napoleonically. And, waving his hand over the Beaumont lobby, "This is my theater, and I take responsibility for everything in it." He announced that he had seen five or six British actresses play Mrs. Warren, none of whose names he could remember—not even Coral Browne's, the very recent television Kitty Warren's—and none of whom could hold a candle to Ruth Gordon. One may allow for some defiance in these remarks to a critic who has often questioned Papp's wisdom and competence, but the fact remains that Papp did, of his own free will, perpetrate this outrageous bit of casting, and one must ask oneself (no good asking him!) why.

Papp has had a disastrous couple of seasons at the Beaumont with new American plays and nonstellar casts; he is clearly trying to recoup his

fortunes by swinging the other way. But it is equally clear that he has no idea about what he is doing: among several ridiculous projects, he mentioned at one time Racine's *Phèdre* directed by Truffaut and starring Catherine Deneuve! My point is that considerable as Papp's administrative and promotional gifts may be, his artistic perception—his taste—is minimal. Yet this is the man who runs the half dozen playhouses that form the Public Theater, the two stages at Lincoln Center, and Shakespeare in Central Park, and who also tried to run a Broadway season of young American playwrights at the Booth Theater. The opening bill was *The Leaf People* by Dennis Reardon, the author of the not unworthy *The Happiness Cage*, who here, however, had either written an impossible play or had had his play ruined by the staging of Tom O'Horgan, a dreadful director, whom Papp should have known better than to hire (except that O'Horgan had pulled off a few vulgar spectaculars like *Hair*, *Jesus Christ Superstar*, and *Lenny*). *The Leaf People* got wretched reviews (probably worse than it deserved, but not *much* worse) and closed shop after one week, putting an end also to Papp's projected Broadway season.

And this is the man who, were we to have a National Theater in our time, would most likely be entrusted with its running, and about whom hagiographies like Stewart W. Little's *Enter Joseph Papp* have already been written. The sad truth is that Papp is a semiliterate fellow who, for instance, writes as follows (I quote from his letter to Robert Wood, then president of CBS, who had just seriously undercut the televised version of *Sticks and Bones*, the controversial David Rabe play): "You proceed through life . . . finding ersatz substitutes for the real thing which has long disappeared with your vestige of decency which may at one time have been of some concern of you and your colleagues. . . ." [Little, *op. cit.*, p. 305]. That "concern of you" is most likely a typo or *lapsus calami*, but the "long disappeared" and "ersatz substitutes" are, I am afraid, genuine Papp. I would not ordinarily wish to subject to such rigorous scrutiny the prose style of a self-educated person, except for the fact that he has set himself up as the dictator of a large part of our theater, hiring and firing directors at a whim, redirecting their productions or misdirecting entire productions from the beginning, surrounding himself with feeble associates who are no more than yesmen.

In his headstrong folly, Papp has not only overreached himself artistically, he has also shown signs of grave—let's say—disingenuousness. When he took over the Lincoln Center theaters, he proceeded, contrary to everyone's advice and minimal common sense, to do Shakespeare in the tiny, experimental Forum (since renamed the Mitzi E. Newhouse, after an infelicitously named million-dollar donor) into which these works could be squeezed only with considerable mangling. For the large, in some ways unwieldy, Vivian Beaumont stage, he reserved plays by young, often inexperienced, American authors that were frequently conceived on a small scale, with few characters. They rattled around in that enormous space, and managed to look even worse than they usually were. When the public—not to mention many scholars and some critics—made it quite

clear that they would have none of this, Papp blamed it all on their stodginess (as if that stodginess had not worked as much *for* him as against him) and went on to make changes that may, in time, prove equally disastrous. In one of his typically derailed manifestoes, Papp proclaimed that the time had come, as he presciently realized, to mount the classics at the Beaumont, while relegating more experimental works to the Newhouse—in other words, that through daringly advanced thinking he had discovered that the earth is round. He also declared that it no longer paid to put on plays off-Broadway because, what with small theaters and mounting costs, even successes were losing money—another fact that was generally known. He then stated that Broadway's time had come, and went on to the aforementioned season of American playwrights that, as I said, got as far as one playwright for one week.

But the most disappointing thing yet may be Papp's idea of how to do the classics at the Beaumont, to which policy he was driven, I reiterate, not by common sense, but by a series of resounding failures. The one hit that further encouraged him in this direction was *A Doll House* (as the title should read, rather than *A Doll's House*, which is a Britishism) with Liv Ullmann. It was an ominous success, full of bad portents. It was a play that had been done better a few seasons back with Claire Bloom in Christopher Hampton's superior translation, with much finer staging and a more acceptable supporting cast—notably without Sam Waterston, who turned Torvald into a pipsqueak who came across as the maturely womanly Miss Ullmann's spoiled brat of a son. Of course, under another director and in Norwegian, Miss Ullmann had just concluded a triumphant Scandinavian tour as Nora, and for her English-language theatrical debut, she wanted to play it close to the chest. But in the theater, as elsewhere, one has to take calculated risks to achieve anything out of the ordinary. Her English Nora was good, but nowhere near what she had been giving us on screen in recent films by Ingmar Bergman and Jan Troell, to which, and to her star quality, the solidly sold-out *Doll House* and all the shouting were due.

How then does Papp start his first all-classic season at the Beaumont? With a repeat of *Hamlet* with Sam Waterston, which, under Michael Rudman's misconceived direction, had already been execrated by discerning observers the summer before in Central Park. Granted, the fault is not entirely Papp's; it was also Clive Barnes's. Barnes had absurdly overpraised Waterston's pitiful Laertes in an earlier Papp *Hamlet* with Stacy Keach (equally overpraised by Barnes), and ridiculously suggested that Papp should next try a *Hamlet* with Waterston. When his wish was granted, Barnes naturally proceeded to rave about what most other critics scorned, something Papp was undoubtedly counting on. Yet if Papp has any identifiable quality as "artistic director" besides megalomania, it is surely pigheadedness. Stubbornly he clings to rotten playwrights, floundering directors, abysmal performers, provided he can think of himself as their discoverer. I could not bring myself to see again in camera a *Hamlet* I had hated *al fresco*, but, by all accounts, it was at least as calamitous as

before. It was followed by *Mrs. Warren's Profession*, which is to be followed in turn by that tried and tested favorite, *The Threepenny Opera*, apparently in the tried and tested—and wholly inadequate—Marc Blitzstein version.

Meanwhile back at the Public Theater, which Papp had consigned to workshop productions in a moment of heady dreams of Broadway glory, and which, of course, had to be pressed back into full service right away, things are going no better. At this writing, it houses two productions (with a third on its way), of which one is a total and the other a mitigated fiasco. The former is *Apple Pie*, "a new musical work" by Myrna Lamb, whose *Mod Donna*, "a play with music," Papp produced and directed in 1970. Myrna Lamb calls herself a feminist playwright, and, as Walter Kerr observed, she may indeed be a feminist. *Mod Donna*, the old musical work, was pretentious claptrap, and so, in spades, is the new one, again under the personal direction of Joe Papp. Told almost exclusively in musical numbers, it purports to be the story of Lise, a girl from Nuremberg whose German officer father proves "tainted" by Nazi standards and is killed by four storm troopers, one of whom is called—by metonymy, I suppose—Streicher, whereupon Lise and her mother are raped.

The rest of the play is some sort of court trial situated in the U.S.A., whither the characters and the action have been mysteriously transplanted, and at which Lise's mother is the prosecutor. The four storm troopers now reappear as four Uncle Sams, and later in various other roles, e.g., a typical respectable American whom Mother wants Lise to marry, even though she is already married to Harry, a grocer who, seemingly, is the reincarnation of Lise's father, and thus played by the same actor. Lise also has a black lover who fights some kind of allegorical duel with Harry and also impregnates our heroine, who has an abortion performed on her by another of the Uncle Sams in the guise of an evil abortionist who, apparently, molests her sexually. The black lover accuses Lise of exploiting his blackness, even though she clearly loves him for himself—or at least as clearly as anything can be inferred from this farrago. There are also a couple of not very scrutable references to apple pie; Harry is always doing tap or softshoe routines that are quite out of synch with the rest of the proceedings (though Lee Allen, who is the one asset of the show, performs them charmingly); Lise has a kind of mirror image following her through this "work" although the image does not look like her or reflect her actions, and serves, like the rest of *Apple Pie*, no compelling purpose.

Part of the text is in pidgin German, pronounced fairly incomprehensibly by the cast, but proving scarcely less communicative than the English part. Miss Lamb has two modes: impenetrable word-mongering and stultifying banality. She seems to be saying that women are abused in America in a way tantamount to the Nazis' treatment of the Jews; that they are cursed with remote fathers echoed by weak husbands, and with scheming and ruthless mothers; that they are misunderstood and rejected by their lovers while being exploited and assaulted by other men. Self-serving oversimplifications as these caricatures of ideas are, they

are further devaluated by Miss Lamb's nearly total inability to write, and by Nicholas Myers's, her composer's, inability to compose anything that does not sound slavishly like Kurt Weill or Jacques Brel, while still managing to miss out even on the faded appeal of effective imitations. In the end, as you may have guessed, Lise reasserts her identity and integrity for no good reason conveyed to me, and, after having been put upon like Sade's Justine and Pearl White's Pauline rolled into one, comes through like a brick. The costumes by Timothy Miller are thoroughly tasteless, but the usually satisfying David Mitchell can hardly be blamed for not knowing what sort of a set to design; he comes up with a curtain of ropes behind which we get projections mostly of Richard Lindner paintings. Since Lindner paints sadistic female monsters from the point of view of a groveling, masochistic male, his vision is the exact opposite of Miss Lamb's, in which a female lamb, through sheer endurance, survives the cleavers and knives of male and maternal butchers. For whatever it is worth, Miss Lamb's ex-husband was, by profession, a butcher, which sounds like a conceit out of a John Guare play.

That brings me to Papp's other current production, Guare's *Rich and Famous*. It starts with Bing Ringling, a young dramatist about to make it: his 148th manuscript is opening on Broadway this very night, with his girl friend Leonora in the lead, and Bing's school chum Tybalt, the now enormously successful movie actor, out front in the audience. Moreover, Bing is collaborating with Anatol Tora, a madly chic composer of classical music as well as Broadway musicals, on a musical comedy based on *The Divine Comedy*, and Tybalt is dying to take over the lead in Bing's straight play, thus insuring a long run. The play, however, fails, and the rest of *Rich and Famous* chronicles Bing's rejection by everyone except a couple of supergrotesques: a woman producer who wants fiascos, so she can stage spectacular comebacks; and a now married former mistress who meets Bing in a museum before a landscape painted by her grandfather into which she steps and, when Bing refuses to follow her, disappears. Those who turn on Bing and drop him include Leonora, Anatol, Tybalt, and his doting parents who kept all of his bath water in mason jars and never flushed down any of his tinkle. When he tells these adoring progenitors that his play is a flop, Mom woefully exhibits the gown she was going to wear to the opening and all the presents she got for the critics, including "English lessons for Channel 47." Dad, more directly, exclaims, "What kind of shit are you hurling at us?" They disown him, crawl into bed to watch Tybalt on TV, and end up by declaring him their son.

Needless to say, all of this is done in the absurdist manner, but it is not amusing enough—not even the notion (similar to one Guare already used in *Cop-out*) of having only two actors, Anita Gillette and Ron Leibman, play all the characters surrounding Bing. There are, however, some quite funny one-liners, as when the woman producer announces that "a flop on Friday can be a hit on Sunday," and Bing retorts, "The greatest comeback since Easter?" But much of the humor is infantile, such as the Father's playing of a silly word-association game, or Anatol Tora's every

composition turning into something Jewish (this flabby take-off on Leonard Bernstein falls very wide of the mark—a pity, considering the rich possibilities), or all those not very clever parodic songs Guare himself has written for the show, a reprise from *The House of Blue Leaves*, as it were.

The main troubles, though, are two. First, that the big scenes do not rise to the requisite lunatic grandeur. Thus when Bing climbs up into the eye of Tybalt in a giant Times Square sign so as to see the world from that privileged vantage point, and is soon joined there by Tybalt himself about to jump to his death for sound financial reasons, the actual writing simply does not match the pleasant zaniness of the conception. So too the entire play lacks focus: we never know whether Bing is more than an amiable, and possibly also ambitious, dolt; certainly William Atherton's performance does not help clarify matters. Secondly, these strung-together vignettes lack a sense of direction. The final scene gives us the three actors, dressed identically, throwing away identical gold cufflinks with the initials R and F (for rich and famous) that they all bought in a funny little shop—the devil's tool to lead them astray. So, then, seduction by wealth and celebrity is the rickety framework on which the play is hung, but, in that case, what do such things as the museum episode have to do with anything? And in what way is Bing guilty, since there is no evidence that he sold out? It is all a bit too simplistic as well as vague, and though Gillette and Leibman act their various roles adroitly, they are unable to act up a storm out of Guare's at best breezy lines. Melvin Bernhardt's staging is more frantic than genuinely inventive.

There were two other Papp offerings this fall and winter season: *The Shortchanged Review*, an undistinguished and turbid melodrama taken over from an off-off-Broadway theater organization, and *Jesse and the Bandit Queen*, a showcase production of an apparently unfinished play, which I did not get to see. All in all, not a very distinguished, or even copious, showing from the great showman who runs our two largest theatrical emporiums, uptown and downtown.

WILLIAM H. YOUNGREN

Louis

WRITING IN THESE PAGES last spring about Bix Beiderbecke, I used Louis Armstrong as something of a foil to Bix. A sense of having perhaps been slightly unfair made me want to right the balance and set me listening closely to Louis again for the first time in years. As it happens, there are a number of recent LP reissues of his early work—which is, for me and for most listeners, his greatest work—and so he makes a suitable subject for this yearly records report.

It's interesting that there is no book about Armstrong remotely comparable to the brilliant Sudhalter and Evans critical biography of Beiderbecke. Long ago there were a couple of ghosted "autobiographies," done (as I recall) in his yakety-yak Satchmo manner; and in 1971 Max Jones and John Chilton published their affectionate and informative memoir *Louis*. But no one, so far as I know, has taken (or is taking) the trouble to do the sort of exhaustive research into Armstrong's life and acquaintance that Sudhalter and Evans did into Beiderbecke's. Yet of course it would have been (and still would be) far easier than it was with Bix since Louis himself was in our midst until five years ago, and there are many musicians still around who remember him at all stages of his career except perhaps the earliest. Why then has no one taken the trouble? Perhaps because there seems nothing to explain. Bix has always been a mystery, both in his life and in his music, but with Louis there seem to be no mysteries. The artists we feel impelled to make up legends about are those, like Bix, whose art has an impact upon us far in excess of the available facts about them. Shakespeare is of course the supreme example, but in jazz there are, besides Bix, Bessie Smith and Charlie Parker—and it is worth noting that reportedly excellent biographies of both of them have also recently appeared. A dearth of facts stimulates the creation of a legend, which in turn eventually stimulates a desire to dispel the legend by digging out the facts. But we are inundated with facts about Louis Armstrong. Moreover, the facts perfectly form a ready-made American legend, right down to Louis' having actually been born on July 4, 1900. It all seems too good to be true, yet it is all undeniably true, so why look further? From the Waifs' Home in New Orleans to his travels as goodwill ambassador for the government, everything fits perfectly. Instead of dying young (like Bix and Bird) or forgotten (like Bessie), Louis stayed around for seventy-one years, constantly on public view for the last forty of those years, living out his legend to the point where there seems nothing left to say.

This is of course a mistake. Louis was a genius, genius is always a mystery, and there is plenty of work left for the biographer and the critic. The most important critical questions are probably those that concern

Louis' supposed "sell-out" to commercialism in the early thirties. Is that really what happened? I and most other listeners have always thought so, but I am troubled by the fact that so acute a critic as Whitney Balliett continues to feel that some of the performances of the thirties are the greatest of all. Here I should like to investigate a more limited but still important question: how did the ambitious, hard-swinging, but slightly rigid cornetist who left King Oliver in mid-1924 evolve into the incomparable master of four or five years later? The LP reissues I mentioned earlier enable us to watch the process in fascinating detail.

Louis' first records, made with Oliver in 1923, are almost as well known and are as readily available as the great Hot Five, Hot Seven, and Savoy Ballroom Five records he made under his own name in Chicago between November 1925 and the end of 1928, while he was working with the big bands of Erskine Tate and Carroll Dickerson. But the records Louis made between his departure from Oliver and his emergence as a studio band-leader in his own right have received less attention. These fall mainly into two groups: those made with Fletcher Henderson between October 1924 and October 1925, when Louis left the band and shortly thereafter left New York to return to Chicago, and those made with various singers. On the vocal records the accompaniment is sometimes by Henderson men, sometimes by a group led by pianist Clarence Williams and usually including the great Sidney Bechet, and sometimes by the Red Onion Jazz Babies, which was really just the Williams group with Louis' wife Lil at the piano in place of Williams. There is also a large group of vocal records made after Louis' return to Chicago; these are of special interest because he is usually alone with the singer and a pianist rather than merely part of a band, as on most of the New York vocal records. Virtually all of this music is now accessible.¹

The usual way of drawing the contrast between Beiderbecke and Armstrong has been to praise Beiderbecke's tone while slighting his powers as an improviser, and to praise Armstrong's powers as an improviser while saying little or nothing about his tone. As it stands, this is nonsense. Bix was, in his way, as tirelessly inventive an improviser as Louis, and Louis' tone in his heyday was every bit as beautiful as Bix's. However, I think that behind this way of contrasting the two men lies an important truth about the essential difference between them.

Last spring I made the point that while everyone talks about Bix's *beautiful tone*—and often rather patronizingly, much as the large and awkward girl in the Noel Coward song is said to have *nice hands*—what is

¹ A generous sampling of Louis' work with Henderson is available on Biograph BLP-C12, BYG 529086, Milestone MLP 2005, and Decca DL 79227, all of which are under Henderson's name, and on Decca DL 79233, which is under Louis' name. There was also once a 4-record Columbia Henderson set, C4L-19, which bore the peculiar title "A Study in Frustration" and included several of the sides made with Louis; this seems to have gone out of print, but can still be found in cut-out bins. All of the vocal records, except those made with Bessie Smith (which are of course on the complete 10-record Columbia Bessie Smith set), are on French CBS 63092, 64218, 65379, 65380, and 64521; Biograph BLP-C6; and BYG 529076. These LP's are all under Louis' name.

actually remarkable about Bix's tone is not so much its undeniable beauty as its complete flexibility, the way in which it constantly changes in response to the expressive content of the improvised phrases. In this it is something like the voice of a great lieder-singer. As in great lieder-singing, the extraordinary tonal flexibility vividly projects the image of a living speaker's constantly fluctuating inner life, with the result that even Bix's most forthright and extroverted solos are somehow intimate, the sort of utterances in which we are at least as interested in following the speaker's moment-to-moment play of mood and sensibility as we are in what is being said. Louis' great small-band solos are not like this at all. They are more like clear, vigorous arguments, or even lectures, conducted throughout with enormous high spirits, sanity, compassion, and wit. Even the most intimate of them, the one on *Savoy Blues* for example, are also robust and even imperious. When you listen to that chorus, or to the florid stop-time chorus on *Potato Head Blues*, or to the dead serious blues chorus on *Knockin' a Jug*, or to the exuberant choruses on *Put 'Em Down Blues* and *No One Else But You*, or to the breathtaking series of exchanges between Louis and pianist Earl Hines on their duet record of *Weather Bird*, your attention seems to be all on what is being said, and on the superb logic with which points are made and paragraphs are developed, all on the objective content of the music rather than on the evolving inner life of the person producing the music. If listening to Bix's greatest solos is like listening to Janet Baker sing a Berlioz song, listening to Louis' is like listening to Toscanini or Colin Davis perform one of the late, great Haydn first movements. Of course this way of putting it won't quite do either: the objective content of a Haydn first movement comes to us stamped by Haydn's (and Toscanini's or Davis') distinctive personality, whether we are aware of it or not; and the objective content of a song like *Le spectre de la rose* plays an important part in engaging us in following the moment-to-moment inflections of Berlioz' writing and Baker's singing. No rigid separation can be maintained. Still, I can think of no better way to correct (and perhaps account for) the usual misleading way of contrasting the two men or to describe what seems to me the real difference between them.

With Beiderbecke we cannot watch the process of growth and development that took him from the rather stolid and placid playing of his Wolverine days to the very different playing of his later years, for he made no records from January 1925 to October 1926, which was evidently the crucial period. With Armstrong, as I suggested above, we are more fortunate. When he joined Henderson, the band was very much in the New York style of the time: fussy, precise, and tight in rhythm, with none of the loose-jointed swing or the easy, "singing" quality common to the bands of New Orleans and the Southwest.² The arrangements, mostly by Don Redman, were elaborate, tricky, and full of "novelty" effects; the solos were for the most part undistinguished. Redman's alto playing was

² The pre-Louis Henderson band can be heard on Biograph BLP-12039, BYG 529083, and Historical Records Volumes 13 and 18.

awkward and rubbery, with none of its later suavity. Coleman Hawkins was giving no hint of the way he would blossom forth a few years later: on tenor sax he was still playing in the fashionable "slap-tongue" style and sounded like a dyspeptic bull-frog; on C-melody he sounded, incredibly, just as one would expect those stacomb youths who people the cartoons of John Held, Jr., to sound. The only first-rate jazz soloist was trombonist Charlie Green, but he could also play straight, pit-band trombone and was required to do so a good deal of the time. The greatest lack was in the trumpet section, which usually comprised two relentlessly straight players, Elmer Chambers and Howard Scott. Joe Smith, who was later to grace some of Henderson's finest records, had played on and off with the band, but had not yet stayed long enough to influence its style. It was into these unpromising surroundings that Louis Armstrong stepped (or rather clumped) in October of 1924, wearing thick-soled high shoes and, to the immense (though short-lived) amusement of his sophisticated new colleagues, looking like just another fat boy from the country.

His first few solos start forth electrifyingly from the fudgy reeds and doo-wacka-doo brass. The one on *Go 'Long Mule* (which used to be available in the Columbia set) has been transcribed by Gunther Schuller in his excellent book *Early Jazz*.³ It is characteristic of Louis' work at this time (and also earlier, during his stay with Oliver) in being tightly organized around a few, constantly regrouped notes and a simple repeated rhythmic pattern. From these rudimentary materials he generates a terrific swing, but his solos seem both constricted and out of key with what the rest of the band is doing, mere (though most welcome) interpolations. Both the character of his playing and its relation to its musical context were to change very soon. Only three weeks after the *'Go Long Mule* session his horn speaks with a new ease and authority on *Words*, and on *Copenhagen*, though his entrance is rushed and his solo a bit nervous and rhythmically insecure, we hear him, perhaps for the first time, beginning to push himself on the rest of the band: during a 16-bar passage scored for the three trumpets his warm, vibrant tone and vocal phrasing emerge clearly beneath the pinched and clipped playing of Chambers and Scott. Evidently Don Redman heard him too. A couple of weeks later, on *My Dream Man*, Redman scored a similar 16-bar passage with Louis leading rather than Chambers or Scott.

In the weeks and months that follow, Louis' solos show him gradually extending his range and loosening up rhythmically as he simultaneously makes his presence increasingly felt on the rest of the band. On *One of These Days* he has perhaps his best chorus to date, clear and beautifully structured, which in turn calls forth some splendid shouting trombone from Green. Louis' growing rhythmic security is evident in the easily rocking solos and lead on *Meanest Kind of Blues*, the surprisingly sensitive and introspective stop-time chorus on the later of two versions of *Naughty*

³ Both Schuller's chapter on Louis and his remarks elsewhere on the Henderson band are well worth reading in conjunction with these records.

Man, and the beautifully sculpted breaks on *How Come You Do Me Like You Do*. On the earlier version of *Naughty Man* he had not even been allotted a solo: the fact that Redman rescored it suggests once again that he was fast learning how to shape arrangements around Louis and use his talents to best advantage. On *Meanest Kind of Blues* Louis in fact dominates the arrangement, leading off with a solo, later returning for another, and then returning again near the end with a high sustained lead over the reed section. Finally there is the superb chorus on *Mandy* (also transcribed by Schuller), in the closing bars of which Louis attains a grace and rhythmic freedom that he had not approached earlier.

With Louis' Henderson records, as with Bix's Goldkette and Whiteman records, we often have the opportunity of comparing alternate masters of the same tune: BYG 529086 offers masters #1 and #5 of *I'll See You in My Dreams*, #2, #5, and #6 of *Why Couldn't It Be Poor Little Me?*, and #2 and #3 of *Alabama Bound*; Biograph BLP-C12 has #1 and #2 of the splendid *Money Blues*; and the Columbia set included *Alabama Bound* #4. All of these have Armstrong solos, and detailed comparison reveals that in every case Louis, unlike Bix, made only the slightest changes from master to master: the basic solo was set beforehand, either in Louis' mind or perhaps on paper, as Walter C. Allen suggests in his indispensable book *Hendersonia*. Men who worked with Bix say that he too usually prepared a basic solo on each tune and varied it only slightly from performance to performance. But this was clearly not his practice when it came to recording: then he usually tried to play his solo differently each time, taking the risks involved in such "existential" improvising and often falling flatter than Louis ever does on the Henderson records. Sudhalter and Evans offer a good deal of evidence that Bix, with his interest in classical music and his attempts at composition, thought of his records as a link with posterity; for Louis they were probably just part of the job.

The remaining records that Louis made with Henderson complete the band's metamorphosis. Joe Smith returned, this time to stay for several years, for the April 1925 session at which *Memphis Bound* and *When You Do What You Do* were recorded. His beautiful, limpid horn, heard in solo on the former side, is a perfect foil to Louis' intensity, as it would later be to the intensity of Tommy Ladnier, Rex Stewart, and Bobby Stark. On *When You Do What You Do* Louis has one of his most inventive Henderson solos, and his surprisingly modern, jivey introduction over chromatic sax figures shows once again his liberating influence on the band and the degree to which Redman was incorporating that influence into the arrangements. Finally, there are the last four sides, *Sugar Foot Stomp* and *What-Cha-Call-'Em Blues*, recorded in May, and *T.N.T.* and *Carolina Stomp*, done the following October. Here, at last, everything works. Hawkins is beginning to sound like himself; the rhythm section has lost its stiffness; Smith's presence has freed the brass section of the last traces of doo-wacka-dooism; the arrangements are loose, free, and witty, with none of the mannered effects of only a few months before; brass and reeds are played off against each other with great skill; the solos are carefully prepared for

and led up to rather than merely plugged into holes that have been left for them. For the first time we are listening not to a good straight band that happens to have a couple of great jazz soloists but to a great jazz band, a thoroughly integrated unit. We are listening, in fact, to the first great recorded big-band jazz.

The vocal records made during Louis' stay in New York tell a slightly different but complementary story. The first session, held the same week that he joined Henderson, was with the formidable Ma Rainey. Not surprisingly, Louis plays very conservatively, very much in the manner of his mentor King Oliver. This conservatism, like the slight stiffness of his first Henderson solos, was soon to disappear. Two months later, in December 1924, Louis and Henderson, by themselves, had three sessions with Maggie Jones, a good (though by no means great), rather citified blues singer. Here, for the first time without other horns to crowd him and with Henderson's fine rolling piano behind him, Louis begins to experiment and to spread himself. No longer does he keep to the tried and true formula, usually followed by Oliver and others in their blues accompaniments, of merely alternating phrases with the singer in a call-and-response fashion. Instead he often plays along behind Maggie Jones, creating a continuous line of sensitive counterpoint, much as Lester Young was to do for Billie Holiday a decade later. On the rollicking *Anybody Here Want to Try My Cabbage?* and the sombre, very slow *If I Lose, Let Me Lose* Louis' delicately pointed commentary on the vocal line achieves a "speaking" intimacy which we don't usually associate with his work but which was increasingly to mark his vocal records and to make them an important and unique part of his recorded output. Best of all the Maggie Smith sides is the justly famous *Good Time Flat Blues*, on which Louis' by now prodigious technique is displayed lavishly but never irrelevantly, never (as was so often to be the case later) in ways inappropriate to the musical context.

Louis never returned to the strict call-and-response pattern, except for the first of his two pairs of sessions with Bessie Smith. There is an old story that she did not want to record with him; perhaps he knew this and was intimidated by her, as he had evidently been by Ma Rainey. Even so, he and Bessie produced some wonderful music together at these sessions, *Cold in Hand Blues* and *You've Been a Good Old Wagon* standing out especially. On the second pair of sessions Louis was looser, Bessie sang in a much gutsier way than before, and Charlie Green was added. The resulting sides are perhaps even better than the earlier ones, but are too well known to demand detailed comment here.

Because virtually all of the Chicago vocal records were made just with Louis and a pianist rather than with a band, as had been the rule in New York, we can follow his growth in breadth and command with particular clarity. The two outstanding singers of the Chicago period are Chippie Hill and Sippie Wallace. They were both raw, earthy country blues singers, untouched by any superficial "sophistication" of manner but able to project a wide range of feeling with what in fact was considerable musical as well as emotional sophistication. Some critics, most recently

Richard Hadlock in his useful *Jazz Masters of the Twenties*, have felt that Louis' increasingly virtuosic and "advanced" playing is out of place with such singers, and that he should have toed the line and confined himself to the orthodox call-and-response style. But what counts, after all, are results. On the best of these records one again and again hears Louis using his extraordinary, burgeoning command of his instrument to complement very satisfyingly these singers whose musical orientation was so different from his own.

The first two sides with Chippie Hill, made the week Louis returned to Chicago, are *Low Land Blues* and *Kid Man Blues*, both of which show him in fine form. On *Low Land* his tactful, even gentle backing and floridly eloquent solo give a new and surprising dimension to the stark, defiantly declaimed words ("I ain't gonna marry, ain't gonna settle down; / Gonna keep on drinkin', keep on runnin' 'round"); on *Kid Man*, omitted for some reason from the French CBS records and available only on Biograph BLP-C6, his solo is equally eloquent but perfectly simple. Of the remaining eight Chippie Hill sides, the greatest are the poignant *Trouble in Mind* and the bitter and remorseless *Pratt City*, but there are other fine ones too: *Pleadin' the Blues*, on which Louis' solo is full of smears and "covered" tones, and the unexpectedly gay and bouyant *Mess Katie Mess*.

Sippie Wallace had made two fine sides with the Clarence Williams group in New York, but though Louis was present he was not much in evidence. The two best sides from their first two Chicago sessions are *A Jealous Woman Like Me*, on which Louis' angry chorus, based on a descending riff figure, powerfully enforces the lyrics, which, as on many of the Chippie Hill sides, are direct to the point of fierceness ("You love everybody, / What is wrong with me?"), and *A Man for Every Day in the Week*, on which the lyrics are delightfully cheeky and Louis' solo is jauntily lyrical. Their third and last session together, held in May of 1927 at the beginning of a whirlwind eight-day period during which the brilliant Hot Seven sides were also recorded, marks the culmination of Louis' work with singers. An undistinguished clarinetist named Artie Starks was also present, but most of the time he keeps out of the way, leaving Louis free to do the finest work he was ever to do in this special, rather rarefied medium. The session is also beautifully recorded, and the richness and lustre of Louis' tone—not, alas, faithfully captured on the LP reissues—are beyond words. On the first chorus of *Lazy Man Blues* his languorous phrases behind Sippie perfectly set the mood of the piece, and later he has another of his great simple solos. *The Flood Blues* is a minor blues with hokum effects, but has some fine, taut, very formal arpeggiated accompaniment from Louis. On both *Dead Drunk Blues* and *Have You Ever Been Down* he plays beautifully relaxed riff choruses with the clarinet joining in under him. On the latter side Sippie joins in too, halfway through the chorus, singing wordlessly as though in a trance, and the effect is enchanting. (The French CBS dubbing of *Dead Drunk Blues* was made from an almost unlistenable 78-rpm original; another reason for also buying Biograph BLP-C6 is that it contains a satisfactory dubbing.)

The other singers whom Louis accompanied with only a piano are

hardly worth mentioning—though it is worth mentioning that he played well for almost all of them most of the time. The small-band records with singers are another story. The best of them were done with the Clarence Williams group behind a marvelous singer named Eva Taylor. Standing at the opposite end of the spectrum from Hill and Wallace, Eva Taylor—who, incidentally, is still singing—was a thoroughly trained and very sophisticated show-singer with impeccable diction and intonation. Not at all, in other words, the sort of singer likely to call forth praise from jazz critics, who have never given her her due. But she had a thrillingly dramatic voice and projection that evidently excited Louis and Sidney Bechet, and pushed them to outdo themselves on record after record. On their first two sides together, *Of All the Wrongs You've Done To Me* and *Everybody Loves My Baby*, Louis' fine, straight rhetorical declamation is clearly the result of his attempt to match her singing style. On *I'm a Little Blackbird Looking For a Bluebird* her unabashed and stunning theatricality not only evokes fine things from Louis and Bechet but even enables her to make believable and strangely moving the dreadful lyrics ("I'm a little jazzbo looking for a rainbow too, / Building fairy castles same as all the white folks do"). But the greatest of their collaborations, and one of Louis' very greatest records, is the fast and hard-driving *Cake Walking Babies*, on which he and Bechet strive to outdazzle each other, and everybody wins. There is one other fine band-singer to mention, Alberta Hunter, who recorded with the Red Onion Jazz Babies under the name of Josephine Beatty. She too was a show-singer of sophistication and dramatic power, but her voice was heavier and darker than Taylor's. Louis recorded many of the same tunes with both of them—sometimes on the same day, in fact—and the comparisons are always revealing.

After the last Sippie Wallace session Louis made no vocal records for over a year, until June 1928. At that time a sublime stroke of recording industry illogic decreed that he, Jimmie Noone, and Earl Hines be wasted on eight sides with the wretched Lillie Delk Christian, the possessor of an ugly querulous voice, no musical taste, and an improbable, hilarious down-Maine accent. ("Was it a dream, are you really mine?") Armstrong and Noone noodle brilliantly when they get the chance, but there is almost none of the sense of spontaneous collaborative creation present earlier even on records with mediocre singers. The one moment when things really come alive is on *Too Busy* when, as Lillie Delk is toiling along, Louis suddenly breaks into joyous scat-singing beneath her—with what motives one can only guess. A year later, in the summer of 1929, he and a small group made two sides with a much better singer, Victoria Spivey. But on both of them his backings are full of fluffs and badly attacked notes, and his solos are lazy and cliché-ridden. Plainly, he was not trying for much. A little over a week later he began the series of recordings with Carroll Dickerson's band (though under his own name) that were to set his style for the rest of his career. There are fine moments on these records, but they are Louis' moments and have as little to do with what the other musicians, often mediocre and badly rehearsed, are doing as did his first

solos with Henderson. He is the star and the others are the backdrop. So—with a few notable exceptions such as the 1947 Town Hall Concert—it was to remain.

The trouble with Louis' later big-band records is not, as has so often been said, that they are arranged rather than wholly improvised like the great small-band records that preceded them. Jazz critics have traditionally seen improvisors and arrangers as natural enemies: improvisors embody the spontaneous creativity which is the essence of jazz while arrangers are paid precisely to stifle that creativity. But this is sheer sentimentality. The right kind of arranged framework, intelligently designed to set off an improvisor's best qualities, can often be a more powerful stimulus to creativity than an improvised context. For while an improvised context will necessarily be somewhat different each time, an arranged framework will always be the same, and can thus give the improvising soloist a familiar and secure launching-pad for his inspiration.⁴ Bill Challis and others provided such a framework for Bix during his stay with Whiteman, and the effects on his imagination were liberating rather than stifling; Louis' last Henderson records show that Redman had learned to do the same thing for him and for the band's other soloists. Louis' later big-band records, by contrast, are vastly *under*-arranged: almost invariably they follow a fixed pattern with the other musicians making only a minimal contribution. Understandably, in such surroundings Louis stopped experimenting and increasingly relied on sure-fire clichés and routines that were to remain virtually unchanged for decades.

Louis' last records with Henderson mark a decisive moment in jazz history. Duke Ellington had not yet begun to record, and Jelly Roll Morton was not to begin his series of Red Hot Peppers sessions until a year later. Here for the first time we have arranger and improvising soloists working perfectly together to produce cohesive performances of great distinction. And things were to get even better. In the years that followed Louis' departure, Redman and then Benny Carter were to furnish arrangements of increasing brilliance that taxed the band's soloists to their limits and made it (and them) the best in the business. One can't help wondering if Louis' later career might have been different had he chosen to stay with Henderson, at least for a while, instead of returning to Chicago and allowing himself to be packaged as a star with the lack-lustre bands of Tate and Dickerson. But this is foolish. Louis was who he was, he made his choices, and no one can blame him. The small-band records he made in Chicago while working with Tate and Dickerson are, after all, his greatest records, and it is certainly possible

⁴ Sudhalter, who has not only written about Bix but also plays fine Bixish cornet with an English band that uses the old Whiteman arrangements, has remarked to me that the care and intelligence with which Bix's solos are prepared actually make it hard to play a bad chorus. (Sudhalter's group can be heard, incidentally, on *The New Paul Whiteman Orchestra*, Monmouth Evergreen MES/7074.)

to derive pleasure from his later work. I find myself unable to do so, however, when I come to it with the promise and adventurousness of his early work fresh in my ears and mind. Bix's musical ambitions were limitless, but they had only begun to dawn on him when he was too far gone in alcoholism to do more than begin to realize them. Louis' ambitions, on the other hand, seem to have been satisfied once he had gained the familiar and enduring mastery of his horn and had found a stable way of making a living. Whereas Bix caved in just when he seemed to be pushing on into exciting new territory, Louis remained for forty years an endlessly teasing reminder of what might have been. It is hard to say which of their two very different fates is the more distressing.

MARCIA B. SIEGEL

Growing Old in the Land of the Young

DANCE IS OBSESSED WITH YOUTH, like all the narcissistic enclaves of our society. Dance as sport, dance as glamour factory—a passion compounded of physical mastery and an idealization of the human form. Other cultures use dancing as an outlet for pent-up emotions, as a celebration of the natural and supernatural wonders of life, as a means of teaching the society's rules, announcing its codes. Western ballet and its twentieth-century relative, modern dance, have minimized these functions or turned them into vicarious experiences. The greater part of society, the audience, doesn't get to do the physical part of dance or its mystery-making either. We sit and watch while the dancers do it for us. We're shown its physical prowess, and though we feel twinges of kinesthetic exhilaration, we suspect that we couldn't possibly achieve any authentic physical charge of our own. Grownups in our society don't ordinarily run and jump and bend and wave their arms, any more than they make magic.

Mechanization has severely curtailed our opportunities to use our physical resources. The suburbanite may travel many miles each day but the only exertion required is a few steps to the garage, a few twists of the arm and hand, the micro-motions of foot to gas and brake pedals. We're so out of touch with our bodies, no wonder we're satisfied with the faint reverberation we feel from a dancer's leap.

In leaving physical expression to dancers—and sports players and rock stars—we've really given away part of ourselves. We've assigned them not only our potential for moving, but our hopes for physical perfection. The more divine their tricks, the less we can identify our own physicality with theirs. However thin or sexy or agile or coordinated or beautiful we are *not*, we know dancers will be. We've made them our so much riper, grander, more potent alter egos that we've caused them to become almost totally separated from us, another race altogether.

Dancers believe it too; they have to. We constantly hear of good dancers retiring in their early thirties or leaving companies they've been associated with long enough to carry major responsibilities. A few years ago Erik Bruhn, probably the greatest danseur noble of our time, retired at forty, then made a comeback—but he plays the villain now instead of the prince. It's not that these premature dropouts can't dance any more but that the reality of what they are doesn't measure up to the ideal of what they've trained themselves to be.

From a very early age the ballet dancer externalizes himself, tries to become a super-version of himself. This image comes from what the audience wishes for, from what their teachers put into their heads, from

the romanticized words of past and present writers, and from the way they see other dancers—in a fairy tale glow of bright lights and makeup and tulle. When Pavlova was eight, she saw her first ballet, *The Sleeping Beauty*. “When we left the theatre, I was living in a dream. . . . That very night, I dreamt that I was a Ballerina, and spent my whole life dancing like a butterfly. . . .” “The lights and warmth made me think of Paradise” (Karsavina). Butterflies don’t have wrinkles or arthritis. I don’t think we can underestimate the power of that prince or butterfly that dominates the strivings of a dancer. The dancer’s goal is not only to become a more than perfect being but to remain there once having achieved the identification. The first place in a ballet company goes to the ballerina, the princess, and not to the friend, the older sister or the wise confidante. Seniority in a ballet company does you some good only if you can conceal it. This means that a dancer’s experience and maturity have no value in the coin of his profession. Older dancers make good teachers, coaches, choreographers, but they cannot use their years on the stage, except in lesser roles.

I was noticing last fall during the Eliot Feld Company’s season at the Public Theater how little he was using the older members of his company, John Sowinski and Elizabeth Lee, who left Ballet Theater twice to dance with Feld, and Naomi Sorkin and George Montalbano. Two of them have now left the company. Christine Sarry, another Feld stalwart, still dances major roles, but the new work he choreographed for her, *Excursions*, styles her as a rip-roaring tomboyish teenager rather than the gifted grownup artist she is.

Like many choreographers, Feld wants to challenge his dancers’ highest powers. This seems to leave no place for the dancer who’s no longer at peak speed, strength and flexibility, or who has to work too hard to achieve them. Most companies, including Feld’s, look like a high school senior class. Ballet sometimes sneaks around this imagery but not often. Feld once choreographed a stunning solo for a woman that required her to be neither virtuosically fast nor classically beautiful nor flirtatiously young, in *At Midnight* (1967). As danced by Elizabeth Lee, it became one of the more profound moments in ballet—a comment on the isolation and despair of the woman who is different in precisely those ways. The solo was choreographed on Cynthia Gregory, who never did it as well as Lee, perhaps because she couldn’t escape her own perfections.

Ballet technique does set up goals. It’s not just a question of dancing well, but of getting your leg up to there, of turning to the exact spot on the diagonal, and when a Baryshnikov comes along with a higher jump, the goal immediately adjusts itself upward. Virtuosity isn’t the only component of ballet training, but it’s stressed more than ever today, even in Europe where a greater range of excellence is conceivable if only because older dancers get tenure there and have to be given things to do. The ever-increasing dance audience is impressed by feats, by flash and even distortion. I find some new ballets exhausting to watch because they’re so high-pitched all the time, but I think a lot of the audience can only feel by feeling used up.

Modern dancers at first denied all this glamourizing of the physical capacities, resisted the confinement of a technique so narrow and exacting. They made room for the dancing person with other qualities, for the high priestess who danced on into her old age, for the mimes, the eccentrics, the earthbound. Without one technique as a norm, modern dance developed in several different directions based on the movement preferences and perceptions of its leaders. You could say it was egocentric but I think it wanted to be—and was—more in tune with human life.

Initially most modern dance choreographers wanted to make dance that expressed themselves. They didn't have to stop dancing early, because their dance was about whatever age or condition they were in. Martha Graham made herself a bride at fifty—in *Appalachian Spring*—because she was a bride then, a great artist and supremely powerful woman marrying for the first time in middle age. I feel sure that the depth of Graham's choreographic achievement has everything to do with her longevity as a performer. She created roles from the inside, with her own huge dimension; ultimately she had to dance them.

The time of individualism passed in modern dance. The drive to see oneself dancing, once satisfied, expanded to include other dancers, and then there came the question why not let them take over? I think this question has determined the present character of just about every middle-generation modern dance company. The companies formed in the last decade don't appear to have considered the question at all. Or haven't had to.

Alvin Ailey was the first to stop dancing, when he was around thirty-five. Like Paul Taylor, who's the same age but who continued dancing until a year or so ago, he had to face the question of how to project his vision through other dancers. Ailey had made intermittent charismatic "soul" pieces but his company mainly does a repertory of other choreographers' works, dancing in a relaxed, all-purpose balletic/Broadway style.

Taylor struggled with the question in *Esplanade*—a dance to Bach in which there are almost no dance steps, just arrangements of walking, running and falling that have been given the intensified dynamics of dance. *Runes*, new this winter, recovers much of the old Taylor vocabulary, but the movement emphasis seems to be on changing the shape of the body, particularly the upper body, rather than traveling. *Runes* is an oracular, incantatory dance, it reminded me of some films I'd seen of Mary Wigman. Something about the dancers' self-possession, self-absorption makes me think they're projections of a sedentary, contemplative Taylor.

Some choreographers have turned much of the repertory over to young dancers but have continued to dance themselves. In a kind of reverse sublimation, Murray Louis choreographed a piece for Rudolf Nureyev, then later danced the role himself, to an almost universal acknowledgment that Louis did it better. Erick Hawkins has developed a whole technique and repertory of soft, pliable dancing that demands no more stamina or

pyrotechnics than can be comfortably pulled off by a man of sixty. His dancers look as happy in it as he does.

Merce Cunningham has handled the problem differently. He's kept his company working at a technical fever pitch, taxing their speed and rhythmic sensitivity to the utmost. Cunningham's movement vocabulary makes use of the articulate footwork of ballet, plus an active, differentiated torso. His dancers can get across the floor with more complicated steps in less time than anyone—and the steps are always embroidered with changes of direction and force. His choreography has lost the fragmented look it used to have; there aren't so many disparate things going on at one time. The dancers do a lot but they're more likely to do it in unison or in small ensembles working in counterpoint or succession. They also work with the idea of support, teaming up fleetingly to lift, hang, fall, carry, then splitting off to another partnership.

Although Cunningham may link up with these groups briefly, he presents himself as a different order of stage being. Cunningham has often set himself apart from the rest of the company. His works are not dramatic, but they become so when Cunningham hovers in the background like an anxious chaperone, walks into the middle of an active ensemble and taps someone on the shoulder to break up the sequence, or paces a difficult metre by clapping out the time. In the last few years he has allowed himself to move differently from the group too.

He gave himself a solo called *Loops*, which he often performs simultaneously with some group activity. Standing in one place, he describes a long rope of curlicued hand gestures. As his hand squiggles, loose-wristed, out, up, over his head, meets the other hand, gives it the gesture to continue, you get involved in all kinds of fantasies; sometimes the hands are separate creatures living a life of their own, sometimes they hold objects or perform tasks, sometimes Cunningham seems acutely aware of them, sometimes he seems to wash his hands of them.

He did studies for himself in which he would drop into a particular spot on the floor or along the walls, perch in a peculiar position, and immediately become still, as settled into the place as if he'd been there for centuries. And he did a short dance called *Solo* (1973), in which he came out, crossed the stage, stood in one place, moved a few steps downstage, lay down, got up and left. Using a very limited number of body parts at a time, and moving those very minimally, he managed to suggest a whole jungle full of animals and birds.

I find several pretty amazing things about Cunningham's doing this, not the least of which is his honesty. No more is he trying to remind us that he was once buoyant, fast, engaging. These dances admit that he is an older man, and that what he can do now is not less than what he could do before, but of a different variety of genius.

As he's been so often during his thirty years of choreographing, Cunningham is once again out in front showing you new possibilities for dancing. This time it's the weightiness of age that he plays with—the sense of solidity and mass, of the earth not as something to resist or to

celebrate but as something with which he is in intimate contact. And also the idea of economy—I think *Solo* must have become a dance about animals because, like a wild creature, he wastes nothing. His repose is complete, but never so deep that he can't come out of it easily. He moves only what he needs to move, looks exactly where he wants to see and nowhere else.

This latest cycle of work has brought Cunningham back to very simple ideas, and in that he now reminds me of some of the earliest modern dancers. Although his intention is still as objective, as non-expressionistic as it ever was, the simplicity of his design, the purity of his concentration has the same kind of basic feeling as Graham's 1930 *Lamentation* or Doris Humphrey's 1928 *Water Study*.

Cunningham's *Rebus* (1975) may be, like all his dances, only about movement. But it is about both these kinds of movement: his own now—pulled in, solid, preoccupied with essentials, and that of his dancers—active, spreading out, spendthrift. It's remarkable for a choreographer to underline the difference between himself and his company this way, to dramatize it.

At the beginning of the dance he's alone on stage, dressed in a sleazy pair of slacks and a sport shirt that's cut long and straight and is buttoned at the neck. He looks like a retired night watchman in Sioux Falls. He's standing in profile in the upstage right corner, feet flat, one hand extended from the elbow to touch a clothes rack with a few garments hanging on it. After a long time, he turns toward the audience and begins a sort of warmup, very carefully and slowly sliding his feet out along the floor, then gradually working up to more vigorous action and expanding his attention from the serious business of his body out to the stage space and then the audience. When he speeds up and uses more of his body, he has to push himself, and the spurts of energy are quickly used up.

Ten dancers enter and begin their warmup, and Cunningham goes back to standing by his clothes rack, this time on one foot, and holding the rack for support. As the other dancers move in ordinary classroom patterns, reposition themselves in the space, stand and wait, Cunningham moves around the periphery, sometimes initiating sequences that they copy, sometimes drawing one or another of them aside to work with individually.

This has all the elements of a dance class though it isn't a dance class. Cunningham is undeniably, indispensably there—the inventor, leader, prime mover, guru—and yet he fades out. He sketches a fast combination for the feet, then walks off and leaves the dancers to finish as soon as he's sure they've got it. He stands behind a man who's lifting a woman, shadows his movements—or is the man following Cunningham's lead? While the group holds a difficult balance, he works with a woman in the background, holding one of her hands and drawing her lightly across the stage as he makes little excursions around her. He's guiding her but he's doing his dance at the same time. Later he crosses with another woman, walking backwards so he can face her and pat her arms, shoulders, waist,

just so. Suddenly she's gone, back working with the group, and he's left there with his hands touching empty space.

While the group is busy, he goes behind the clothes rack and takes off his pants and shirt. Underneath he's wearing red leotard and tights. He steps into the middle of a group that's been standing facing away, they fall, disperse gradually, and he's left alone. He dances his solo, faster and more eccentric than anything the company could do, but also full of effort, even rather desperate. Then all of a sudden he's back posing by the clothes rack, as if some signal interrupted his revels and called him back to the land of the bewitched.

Rebus is the most personal dance I've ever seen Merce Cunningham do. It is sad, ironic and hopeful all at the same time. It states the case of Cunningham and every dancer, not only the poignant case of his age and his dilemma of what to dance, but his relationship to the dancers who carry out his work and will carry it on. This is the first time I've ever seen Cunningham speculate about the future, and his view is ambiguous; the dancers need him and he needs the dancers. He will leave them and they'll leave him. The work will go on somewhere without him, in some form that neither he nor they can be sure of.

Rebus is a parable about the fundamental duality in this whole system of Western dancing. The young dancer is full of energy and power, expresses the fulfillment of the art's possibilities, and is every moment subject to replacement by someone coming up behind. The old dancer is past his technical power but wise as a performer. The young dancer's technique gets used in great displays of brilliance but his qualities as an individual are submerged. The old dancer has learned who he is and how he dances, but the dance is passing him by. And both of them are poised where the audience can't quite put itself, doesn't quite want to be, in a state between mystic intelligence and sweat.

ROBERT S. CLARK

Music Chronicle

IT WOULD BE UNFAIR to judge the current artistic standing of Sarah Caldwell and her Opera Company of Boston by last February's disappointing *Fidelio*. In recent years Miss Caldwell and her small stable of associates and regular guest artists have made Boston a formidable rival of Chicago and San Francisco for the rank of top-but-one among the nation's opera houses. And she has captured and held the attention of intellectuals and trendsetters. (The company completed its eighteenth season this year, but its reputation has been created largely over the past decade.) For her two or three productions a year, Miss Caldwell has attracted to Boston leading set, costume, and lighting designers—in spite of the fact that the company's present home, the Orpheum Theater, is woefully inadequate for opera—and internationally esteemed singers. She chooses repertory not with an eye on the box office, but with an ear to the ground for intellectual fashion and *cognoscenti* opinion: she was on the crest of the Berlioz wave of recent years with the first American staging of *Les Troyens* (in English) and, later, with *Benvenuto Cellini*; she revived Bellini's *Capuleti e i Montecchi* to meet the continuing interest in early nineteenth-century *bel canto*; she has done Verdi's *Don Carlo* in French, the language in which it was written, and Prokofiev's *War and Peace*; and when she elects to do a "standard" work it is more likely to be a stepchild—Verdi's *Falstaff*, for example—than a run-of-the-mill one, a *Trovatore* or a *Tosca*. And yet the company plays to sold-out houses: by the time this appears in print, the Opera Company of Boston will have presented the American premiere of Roger Sessions' complex *Montezuma*, and the demand for tickets was so great that a special non-subscription performance had to be added to the schedule.

Miss Caldwell has been making news recently as a conductor—the first woman to lead the New York Philharmonic and to conduct at the Metropolitan Opera (*La Traviata*)—but she began as an operatic producer-director, and it is as such that she is chiefly noteworthy. Her milieu is an elevated realism; though she is not above an occasional "symbolic" touch, it is difficult to imagine the result if she attempted a production after the lights of Appia or Wieland Wagner. Her Trojan horse, stage-horseflesh (no easy out with films for her) and larger than larger-than-life, was the stuff of which legends are made, and all who saw the Berlioz *Benvenuto Cellini* agree that the denouement, in which the sculptor caused the cast to fall away and reveal the statue of Perseus, was wonderful to behold. Perhaps it was because Beethoven's *Fidelio* offers no opportunity for such strokes—its high moral tone scorns them, in fact—that Miss Caldwell's staging seemed ordinary on this occasion.

The unit set, representing the ramparts of the prison fortress, was

handsome and serviceable, but had a big drawback: several scenes were played as if on a parapet surmounting the structure, and some lines of dialogue and music were lost as the characters climbed (offstage) to the top. Obtrusive bits of stage business that Richard Dyer, in his review of the premiere for the Boston *Globe*, complained of—Leonore washing her hands during the sublime first-act quartet—had been eliminated when I saw the production, but troubling moments remained. For example, as the prisoners (the Harvard Glee Club, and not a very believable lot) were released from the nether chambers for a glimpse of sunshine in honor of the King's birthday, Leonore went from one to the other, anxiously searching each face in the transparent hope that Florestan might be among them. But, when you think of it, has she not seen them all in the two years she has served as Rocco's apprentice, and even if she has not, would she risk the loss of her "cover" in such an obvious manner? This bit of business, and others like it, were too clever by half, and marred rather than decorated the drama. And at one point the staging descended to farce: a changing of the guard took place, accompanied by ramrod-backed marching and commands shouted in German. If this was a deliberate attempt to evoke memories of storm-troopers, the audience's laughter demonstrated that it succeeded. When will our stage directors be done with caricature Nazis?

The best singing of the evening came from the young Polish soprano Magdalena Falewicz, as Marzelline. Her well-controlled lyrical voice is of greater amplitude than the Central-European *soubrette* type that is customary in this role, and she uses it with a lively rhythmic spring and an attention to dynamic shading and coloration. I foresee her undertaking, with great success, what the Germans call the "*jugendlich-dramatisch*" repertory: Eva and Elsa in Wagner's *Tannhäuser* and *Lohengrin*, Elvira in *Don Giovanni* and Pamina in *The Magic Flute*, Agathe in *Der Freischütz*, and the like (indeed, she has already sung the *Figaro* Countess at Walter Felsenstein's Komische Oper in Berlin). She is a distinguished performer who promises much. The major artist of the production was Jon Vickers, whose Florestan has been one of the most powerful portrayals to be seen on any of the world's opera stages in our time. But perhaps he has done it too often: the anguished nobility with which he invests the role has passed from the monumental to the marmoreal, as if each gesture, vocal and physical, had been annealed to prevent shattering. In this context, the sluggishness with which his initial attacks reached the home note sounded more like a deliberate mannerism than a vocal failing, and further subtracted from spontaneity. But Vickers' performance did not lack all impact: it is always a pleasure to hear his trenchant tenor sound sail into Florestan's opening phrase, "*Gott! welch Dunkel hier,*" and when he relaxed and just sang—as he did continuously after the revelation that the young jailer's apprentice was his wife—he gave a great deal of satisfaction. Donald Gramm's Rocco was adequate and often more (was it an index of atypically insufficient preparation by Miss Caldwell's troupe that he had to be prompted audibly?), and Richard Van Allan's Pizarro was inadequate.

The burden of *Fidelio* falls upon the Leonore, and Teresa Kubiak, singing the role for the first time in these performances, did not measure up. Though her attractive voice has a lot of strength, it is not a dramatic soprano in the heroic vein of Flagstad, nor even the Wagnerian-but-not-Brünnhilde vein of Leonie Rysanek. It may have been a supposed need to fill out the vocal lines with tone that accounted for the impression that Miss Kubiak sang most of the evening in a steady *mezzo-forte*, and the failure to husband her resources that made the climactic moments seem wanting. Like Miss Kubiak, one of the most celebrated Leonores of the century, Lotte Lehmann, lacked the vocal resources of the dramatic soprano, but embodied the alternative approach to the role: to humanize it, to draw a musical portrait of a woman desperate, vulnerable, and finally triumphant. I feel sure this is the route to a successful realization for Miss Kubiak, but given the narrowness of her present dynamic and coloristic range and her almost groping conception of the role, the road looks like a long one.

After all is said and done, Miss Caldwell must bear the brunt of the responsibility for the evening's lack of consistency and excitement. I have cited the small but telling awkwardnesses of the staging and alluded to the prevailing impression of insufficient rehearsal, both perhaps attributable to Miss Caldwell's frequent absences from Boston recently. Her conducting, too, seemed the result of a passing acquaintance with the score rather than a thoroughgoing familiarity with it. Here and there an idiosyncratic touch hinted at deeper understanding—a delicate ritard at the climax of the quartet, for example—but more often she was content just to beat time. Fortunately, her choice of tempos was just, and much of this sturdy score came through with something like its accustomed impact. In the stirring first-act trio that begins "*Gut, Sönnchen, gut,*" the staging allowed Rocco, Leonore, and Marzelline to stand still and deliver, and with Miss Caldwell's brisk tempo and good orchestral backing the singers got off the evening's finest and most rousing collaboration. The finale, too, was strong, and the capacity house applauded Miss Caldwell as if it had not noticed her feet of clay.

In March the Opera Orchestra of New York presented Massenet's *Le Cid* in Carnegie Hall. Founded in the late sixties by Eve Queler, still its sole impresario and conductor, as a rehearsal ensemble for singers, OONY has evolved into the city's principal forum for concert performances of non-repertory operas. With a loyal band of freelance musicians, supplemented by regulars from local orchestras who take busmen's holidays, and a number of leading international singers—Montserrat Caballé, Nicolai Gedda, Louis Quilico, Shirley Verrett—who enjoy the opportunity to sing roles unavailable to them in the routine course of their careers, Miss Queler has offered New York audiences Rossini's *William Tell*, Bizet's *Pêcheurs de Perles*, Donizetti's *Parisina d'Este*, Zandonai's *Francesca da Rimini*, and other rarely heard works.

There is a whiff of new interest in Massenet in the air, and Miss Queler (and the tenor Plácido Domingo—reviving *Le Cid* was his idea, it was reported) caught it. The proselytizing of, among others, Richard Bon-

yngue, the British conductor who is married to Joan Sutherland, and Robert Lawrence, a conductor and constant friend of nineteenth-century French opera, has borne fruit recently in American performances of *Esclarmonde* (to be in the Metropolitan's repertory this coming season) and recordings of *Thérèse* and *La Navarraise*. *Le Cid*, a four-act work based on the Corneille drama, is a solid evening's entertainment, but is unlikely to become a repertory piece, or even the occasion of frequent revivals. Massenet seems to have been a close student of other men's musical stage works, and it is not difficult to guess who he was reading when he composed *Manon* (Verdi), *Navarraise* (Mascagni), or *Le Cid* (Meyerbeer and Berlioz). Though the result in *Le Cid* is some worthy music and a substantial melodic foundation that is unusual for Massenet, most of it has the histrionic character of the St.-Sulpice scene in *Manon* rather than the intimate quality of the sentimental touchstones—"Adieu, notre petite table," "Et c'est là l'histoire de Manon Lescaut," and the rest—that assure this opera's place in the repertory.

Miss Queler, an accomplished conductor with a firm beat and a decided flair for the culminating moments of a passage or a scene, subscribes to the axiom that the singers are the rationale for such evenings as she prepares, and all must defer to them. When the singing is as good as Miss Queler got for *Le Cid*, the axiom is indisputable. Grace Melzia Bumbry, who has been alternating between soprano and mezzo-soprano roles for several years, sang the leading female role—nominally for a soprano but quite low-lying—with a fluency and ease of vocal production that I would have guessed impossible the last time I heard her. Though the mid-range and lower reaches of her voice possess an unmistakable mezzo coloration, she has managed to knit a firm (if somewhat forced) top to them, and moves from one register to another not quite effortlessly but with remarkably little strain. And she retains the ability to use her voice to good dramatic purpose. Plácido Domingo's plangent, generous singing in the title role was further evidence that this artist is just about beyond criticism. His voice is not a heroic instrument, and his art not a subtle exploration of dramatic nuance. But by a combination of intelligence, instinct, and tested vocal expedients, he bends every role to his capabilities at the same time that he conveys imaginative identification with it. In the principal bass part (*Le Cid*'s father), Paul Plishka, surely one of the best *basso cantante* voices among New York regulars today, sounded a bit unfocussed and tentative, but was effective enough to sustain his growing reputation. Eleanor Bergquist and Arnold Voketatis were fine in smaller roles, and the orchestra, after a somewhat ragged first act, played well. Columbia Records recorded the evening (and scheduled backup sessions to redo blemishes). No opera lover should sniff at this work without first having heard and considered this performance.

VERNON YOUNG

Nobody Lives Here Any More

PERHAPS NEVER BEFORE have so many on earth been consumed by hatred of those who govern them and perhaps never before has there been so universal an apotheosis of the slob, the vandal, the moral invalid, the spiritual dwarf.

From an otherwise forgotten film, I recall Noel Coward pronouncing, in a magisterial drawl, "The trouble with this century is that I live in it." Would that Luchino Visconti might have confessed as openly, and with matching brevity, that he suffered from the same displacement in time and that in the long run this was what he principally suffered from. His last-treatment version of *Heartbreak House* regrettably illustrated again the confusion of motives (and dramaturgy) which made hash of nearly all his films. Unable to reconcile *being* a Visconti in a demophile world, he was forever over-compensating for his ancestral name and his uneasy political conscience. The solution he proposed, more than once, was self-immolation; as in Pasolini's case, movie-making was Visconti's form of Russian roulette; viz, *Conversation Piece*. An aging, fastidious antiquarian of noble lineage permits himself (quite unconvincingly) to be invaded by a despicable family of parvenus which, in short order, disturbs his peace, all but wrecks his villa and introduces to his attention barbarisms of attitude and language he should have no obligation to digest. The focal member of this Mongol clan is Konrad (Helmut Berger), all kinds of a rotter—informer, fake New Leftist, narcotics pusher, gigolo, you name it — albeit, as played by Berger, rancidly charming. By the end of the film—which feels long, long overdue because, characteristically, Visconti's narrative has no shaping rhythm—we are being hustled into agreeing that we should make room among our antiques for the New Trash because it's worse to be lonely. (Only an Italian would think so!) Konrad has by then performed his sole winning gesture, suicide, a gesture which Visconti hoped would leave us all guilt-stricken since, as the amiable professor heavily implies, *we-all* are responsible for the character and fate of the Konrads—a colossal sophistry neither diminished nor legalized after years of repetition in the literature of kitsch.

The ambience of culture surrounding the lurid content of this ponderous fable makes it more palatable than the contemporary American output, wherein there is *nothing* antique, no shadow of culture, nobody who loves anything older than himself. On the other hand, it would be difficult to attribute *self-love* to the male or female protagonist in most of these films, for he (she) seems never to have been introduced to himself long enough to know if he likes or doesn't like what he sees. He only feels, by reflex, that everyone else is an enemy; like the suppressed child, that life consists of grownups who don't love him. *Alice Doesn't Live Here Any*

More opens with a shocking obscenity aimed at all the world; thirty-odd years later the piece closes with the same obscenity, proving that our Alice has gained little headway. Truthfully it proves nothing; no head has been given her with which to gain way! At a would-be climax, Alice's boy friend of the hour gives her insufferable brat a well-deserved clout and she, of course, explodes self-righteously. The plagued boy friend expostulates, "All right!—but he thinks he can do anything he wants to do *when* he wants to do it!" To which she retorts, "Don't *you* expect to do what *you* want to do when you want to do it?" His logical reply should have been, "Yes, but I'm thirty-five and he's thirteen!" He doesn't make it; he says nothing: the script-writer has left the room rather than face his audience with the heresy of distinguishing between the mature and the pubescent. The calculated evasion is typical not only of this film, throughout, but of a disconcerting number of American items in which an alleged social inquest is taking place with sub-social witnesses whom we're supposed to take on trust as reliable emblems of the human lot. Alice is a boring nobody trying to become a boring somebody, with a minimum of qualifications for being anybody, a peculiar addiction to putrid language and, as extra baggage, that monstrous little hostage, above noted.

What in the name of God constitutes a viable problem in this bogus history? A suburban housewife, unexpectedly widowed at a ripe age, discovers—or in fact does not discover—that she's insufficiently equipped to be anything more useful than a waitress, while clinging to the illusion that she's a talented singer because once in her salad days she placed in an amateur contest. So a waitress she becomes and this is supposed to pass as a spectacle of human waste or of the Female Search for Identity—yet all we're viewing is a dislocated mediocrity with a false notion of her own value and a knack for getting sympathy by weeping into her cocktail when she has "walked her feet off all afternoon" (the dialogue in this sequence is especially inept) and the crummy world hasn't given her instantly a crummy, well-paid job. The growing-up pains of a grown woman is not under any condition my favored subject, yet I do retain a fairly distinct impression of Paul Newman's *Rachel, Rachel*, about a provincial schoolteacher, somewhat more articulate than Alice, if no Emma Bovary; therein was at least an attempt, successful for the most part (thanks to Joanne Woodward's emotional veracity), to get under the skin of the character and authorize her effort to find out who she was. *Alice* is constructed totally from the outside and the very externals are unbelievable; that cafe in a southwestern town never existed—it was a Hollywood mockup.

Alice wouldn't earn a footnote from me if it hadn't been, on both sides of the ocean, so extensively over-praised and if it didn't so boldly typify the flabby support of nonentities, disguised as compassion, which is one of the orders of the day. Common sense tells me not to confuse a lousy movie with international reverberations, yet I'll admit that if script writers and their fellow-hustlers purport to make social parables from what *they* construe to be reality, I am forced in self-defense to extrapolate. The day-

by-day extinctions I can in part see or hear report of on the television—innocent diners blown to pieces by Irish terrorists; three million inhabitants of Phnom Penh, including bedridden hospital patients, forced in one day to flee the city—these warnings of the inconceivable tend to reduce the problem of an Alice in blunderland to nothing. Millions of human beings more personable than Alice live their lives or lose them with no adequate reward for their pain. The only abiding democracy is that of oblivion. But Robert Getchell (scenario) is no Chekhov, and Ellen Burstyn is not an actress who suggests hidden depth. I couldn't care less if Alice doesn't live there any more. Nor do I care if a hoodlum Mafia family is completely exterminated or if a *schmuck* like Duddy Kravitz finances his "vision," the transformation of a wilderness beauty spot into subdivisions on which other schmucks can build frame bungalows, drive away the foxes and pollute the streams for salmon and pike. And why should I let John Frankenheimer twist my arm into feeling any concern for his bull-dozing, sewer-mouthed Pop-Eye Doyle (*French Connection II*) because the kingfish villain is a narcotics king (well-dressed and -spoken, naturally) which automatically vindicates the savagery of Doyle, who, but for the grace of God (and that's milked in the best, if most gratuitous, scene) would have been riding shotgun for a Governor Wallace?¹

When film-makers are not being lachrymose over a zero female screaming for a second chance or a self-made bandit unfairly hounded by organized society, they are reenacting lustful daydreams of eliminating the bulk of their captive audiences in a diversity of catastrophe. If one is to judge the state of the nation today by reference to its most profitable films, paranoia and crypto-genocide govern the climate. A considerable share of the population, their fate magnified in wide-screen format, has lately been burned alive in skyscrapers, limousines and air-liners, drowned, raped, buried under earthquakes, maimed by stray machine-gun bullets, decimated by snakes, by unkillable insects and by rubber sharks. Producers and scenarists are resolved that in one way or another their "lairbrother" shall perish violently and they have calculated shrewdly that rehearsals of his extinction are Great Entertainment. If they've been cuing in to Edmund Burke—"whatever is fitted in any sort to excite the ideas of pain and danger . . . is a source of the sublime"—they have read him like the Devil reads the Bible. Pain and danger uninformed by art are principally the sources of sadistic fantasy; eventually, of deadened sensibilities which will accept any further terrors our century has in store, so long as they're at least as distant from the spectator as a cinema screen. Pain and danger are impressive in a fiction in the degree to which they are experienced by someone expressively appropriate to the endangered moment. Art, unlike Christianity, cannot accommodate Just Anyone, however humble, unfortunate or vicious, as an object of tragedy or compassion. Value is not given; it must be earned in the context.

¹ Perhaps Gene Hackman amplifies my reaction. Whereas I can separate Richard Dreyfuss from his role, I feel (always) that Hackman is infiltrating personal aggression into the characters he plays.

When this distinction, and many others, is allowed, my nomination for the most outrageous film of the year would be *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*: fatiguing, dirty-minded, no funnier than a crutch, cruelly patronizing, and as root-stupid in its premise as in the inferences Forman was confident would be drawn from it. Every aspect of American neurosis is here played upon: resentment of authority for its own sake; latent admiration of the criminal, falsely identified with the political rebel; love-hate of the mother image; guilt about the Red Indian, with the same old Rousseauist conviction of his innate nobility; the collegiate delight in sex as porno and in drinking as a bacchanalia ending in vandalism and unconsciousness; the belief—which contains and underlies all the preceding anxieties—that the social self is only a mask: an authentic man is unimpeded by reason, civility or hygiene; wisdom was for the Greeks—or the birds!

If it may be objected that the author of the "book" is on this occasion American and the director is not, I have an answer in extenuation. Many of the resentments or shibboleths I have been isolating are not confined to the American scene; my article, for the most part, happens to be. All the same, I think it's not beside the mark to observe that the present rage for value nihilism finds its most vehement outlet in the United States, precisely because Americans, having fostered the most grandiose expectations, are feeling more acutely the crunch of an escalating derangement in the order of things. That Milos Forman is Czechoslovak is fortuitous; his native problem finds freer exercise within the permissive dimensions of the American predicament. Those "cute" films he made before leaving Prague, exploiting the more goofy fringes of the Czech proletariat, ill concealed a national tendency, masochistic self-deprecation, classically embodied (all Czechs agree) in *The Good Soldier Schweik*. Self-effacement is normally housed with its opposite impulse. Forman's slumbering sadism was eventually exposed in his contribution to the Munich Olympics film, *Seven Visions*; by trick editing he montaged a seemingly endless army of hurdle-jumpers crashing painfully to the ground in a wild crescendo of cracked shins and broken knee-caps. Such leering strategies abuse the limits of comedy and I am frankly repelled by the quasi-humanitarian lament of Forman's Cuckoo-Nest exhibition; indeed, I would define as pharisaical his invitation to the audience to smirk complacently at the fogged agony of the mentally disturbed and to aggrandize itself by applauding the "individualist" who is in point of fact a cheap felon, a shirker with a G.I.'s brand of cupidity and, by any measure, a malodorous *loughnik*. (As a broad comedian, Jack Nicholson goads me into screaming, "Send in the clowns!")

A league of gullible critics has been fatally eager to accept without argument the degrading analogy of their society with a lunatic asylum and, as the only feasible remedy—strangle the Nurse! (described by *Vogue's* reviewer as a "Fascist"; unsurprisingly he tolerated R. P. McMurphy as a "lovable reprobate"!)

Between the Model Consumer and the Smiler with a Knife, the boggled American, if I take his movies and

their critics for demonstration, has cast a final vote of *no confidence* in his democracy. Where everyone doubts his own sanity, each can have no illusion that his neighbor is any less insane—ergo: the lethal circle in which everyone guarantees by his behavior the inequality he professes to deplore. As for that deep-frozen Nurse, far from being a Fascist she is the standard answer to the problem of a society whose screaming demand for Social Services exceeds any vital supply wherewith to fulfill it. And it does strike me that to supervise daily the recreation of the mentally ill might well require a degree of emotional numbness.

All is not lost (though nearly all): we still have, or had yesterday, in my purview, *Rhoda* and *Kojak*, where we're not being conned to find in every episode a "metaphor." And, for the record, neither in *Badlands* nor in *Dog Day Afternoon* were we given a snow job about the "hero's" guiltlessness. We knew in each case that we were watching a doomed freak. Besides, Malik's film had great beauty and Lumet's suffocating reconstruction was balanced on a hair-line between inventive wit and a tabloid actuality so damned insane as to suggest it shouldn't work as a movie at all. Defying elevated eyebrows, I also enjoyed *Hard Times* (Walter Hill, direction and script); a stoical anecdote from the underworld curiosa of the Louisiana bayou cities in, I assumed, the late Twenties, which I recommend to anyone who might share my odd affection for Charles Bronson, the actor who disdains to react: special target of snobby critics who couldn't walk ten paces as gracefully if they practised for thirty years. Bare-fisted street-fighters, strictly illegal, battle each other in vacant lots or empty garages for ten percent of their promoters' takes, hoping to come out even on bets. No spurious assaults on "the system" are sneaked into the script; the sluggers are in the racket for the relish and the rakeoff; when they're whipped or cheated they don't cry. Bronson, ritualistic hero, comes out of Elsewhere into an adroitly photographed city-within-a-city of shadowed warehouses, docks and boiler-rooms and disappears again (after trouncing every gorgon in sight), uncorrupted, unscathed, unowned—enjoying what Hobbes called "the dissolute condition of masterless men." I couldn't help reflecting that it was less ignoble to knock someone cold in open combat than to turn a mountain meadow into a borscht-belt.

A happy exception to the goose-Everyman movie is George Roy Hill's *The Great Waldo Pepper*. A drag at the beginning, it develops with real heart, and sharp teeth, into a loving, sometimes harsh, retake of the Lindbergh era when, to many hopeful barnstormers, everything was possible and the American Dream would never be grounded. Pepper, a stunt-flyer in yokel country, has dreamed for himself a retroactive heroism: in War I, he assures everybody who'll listen, he fought the great German war ace, Kessler. Eventually he *does* fight him (the legend-in-person is now on retainer for Hollywood sham battles)—and earns the death he asks for. Robert Surtees is commendably responsible for some breathless aerial faking and the film is finally, one can say without sounding too posh, about *art*, about show business as a craft: "peeling off," gaining altitude or crash-landing with a margin of safety—the risks

taken for a public that wants only the thrill and thirsts for a crackup. At the center is a familiar George Roy Hill thesis: man is best himself when physically endangered (and a corollary, that shared danger usually alienates men from their women). Not quite an artist himself—he too visibly nudges his audience and he’s plainly reluctant to edit—Hill is nonetheless a man for most seasons. He has rebuked his own idealism without becoming soured and his films sustain, ingratiatingly, the spirit of play as it passes its zenith and burns out like a spent rocket. A line of Richard Hugo accurately catches his subject: “Killing’s still in but glory’s out of style.”

In the preceding sections of this chronicle, I feel sure that *Nashville*, *The Day of the Locust*, *Hustle* or a half-dozen others would have fortified my point, though I scarcely believe that the point is in dire need of fortification. To speak plainly, slumming is not for me a pleasurable pastime of criticism. As a relief from the “serious” expressions of anti-social nausea I have been outlining, I much prefer the pure adventure gambit: the first twenty minutes, if not much more, of *The Wind and The Lion*; certainly the first half-hour of *Three Days of the Condor*, not so impertinent to our situation as many smarties made out; John Huston’s *The Man Who Would be King*, a great tall-tale, austere edited, grandly photographed among the eye-reaches of Morocco and the Alps, acted with the proper blend of insolence and invading rudiments of humility . . . And if art is the result of conscious effort directed precisely to the end conceived by the imagination, the only pure work of cinematic art I’ve seen in a year was *Henry VIII and His Six Wives* (1975), directed by Waris Hussein; unless I’ve been reading the wrong periodicals, a film ignored or minimized by all those charmless and unperceiving censors I’m expected to greet as colleagues who were wasting their solemn charities on Scorsese, Aldrich and Forman. Hussein’s narrative is beautifully designed, consistently enriched by musical linkages of thought and ironically placed visuals, wonderfully acted by Keith Mitchell who was truly *sovereign* as Henry, cancelling with his more subtle resources (no argument) the groundless notoriety of Charles Laughton, poutily hamming between two registers, the stentorian and the inaudible.

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CHARLES W. MILLARD

Toward the Liberation of Color

WRITERS ON PAINTING, particularly art historians, have tended to polarize the forces that shape the creation of the works about which they write. This is particularly true for the early nineteenth century, for which "Classicism" and "Romanticism" have long since become the catchwords, the former denoting classical or mythological subjects depicted in ancient dress in carefully differentiated compositions of which drawing is the principal determinant, while the latter refers to more "Gothic" subjects presented in dress contemporary either to the subject or to the painting itself in more loosely organized compositions of which color and broad brushwork are the determinants. In part this dialectical stereotype results from the image the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century created of itself. Beginning by establishing theoretical neo-Classicism firmly on a moral and political basis, that period then cried out in reaction against the aridity of academic classicism in favor of the greater imaginative "truth" of Romanticism. This sequence of events, falling roughly into the periods between the Revolution and the end of the Empire and between the latter event and the Revolution of 1830, was largely the creation of theoreticians and writers on art who tended to favor the subject matter of the works they considered over the visual statements made by those works. Because the Classic-Romantic dichotomy corresponded to an intellectual construct of increasing usefulness to the nineteenth century and because artists themselves took up its hue and cry verbally, although not always in their works, it has come to be sanctified in the writing of historians, themselves shaped by nineteenth-century method, who have applied its counterparts elsewhere in the history of art (Mannerism and antimannerism, etc.). Confronting a sizable body of painting created between the first two French revolutions,¹ one is struck by how easily it is possible to pass from Boucher to Delacroix with little sense of having encountered neo-Classicism. In part, this evidences the fact that Classicism and Romanticism are but the warp and weft of a unitary fabric with its own larger design. In part, however, it speaks of the tendency of critics and historians to look for style only in drawing and composition, and of their difficulty in realizing how form can be created through color. For it is hue and value that evidence most clearly the continuity of the painter's enterprise, not only in the period under consideration but throughout the history of art.

The schema inherited by the eighteenth century from the seventeenth was that of light-valued backgrounds, generally blue for atmosphere,

¹ As one was recently able to do in the massive Paris-Detroit-New York exhibition known variously as "David to Delacroix" and "The Age of Revolution."

modulating to dark-valued foregrounds, with color accents distributed more or less evenly throughout the composition. Retaining this basic formula, the eighteenth century nevertheless showed a marked tendency toward close-valued painting giving the effect of monochrome. In the work of painters such as Greuze and Chardin this tendency was toward dark tonalities, in that of painters such as Boucher and Fragonard, toward light. Simultaneously, there was a move toward broader brushwork giving the effect of impasto, although the physical thickness of pigment on canvas was not necessarily increased. The result for the dominant Boucher-Fragonard type of painting was in Friedlander's words, "a movement of the particles of color by loosening the elements that bind them, resulting in an emphasis on space filled with light and color in which bodily volumes fuse." This disembodied color atmosphere, achieved partly through the graying of hues to suppress local color and partly through the use of large areas of blue and green, is seen at its most effective in the *fêtes galantes* of Fragonard. While neo-Classicism reacted against the spirit represented by, or imputed to, such painting by revolting against its subject matter and compositional principles, it broke little with the character of Rococo colorism. Which is to say that painters reacted politically and morally, and that an important part of the neo-Classical response to the Rococo involved simply an adaptation of present and continuing painterly problems to a new ideology.

David, realtive of Boucher and pupil of Vien, is the principal painter in whose work the neo-Classical reaction is embodied and is in many ways single-handedly responsible for it. Thoroughly trained in the Rococo tradition, David broke with that tradition by reversing its tonal structure, suppressing its atmospheric effects, and revising its compositional principles. All three devices worked toward the same end, the hardening and flattening of the picture so that its forms tended to be thrust toward the viewer, rather than receding from him or seeming to evaporate before his eyes. Reversal of traditional tonal structure—a device abetted by the Revolutionary preference for portraiture and large-scale figure painting as opposed to landscape—meant that light forms stood out against dark grounds, emphasizing their sculptural plasticity. Atmospheric effects were suppressed in part by abandoning blue-gray (which had tended in the Rococo to modulate to less atmospheric foreground browns through a grayed green) in favor of a gray running to green or brown, in short by densifying the grays, and in part by using local, isolated color rather than hues melting into one another through a continuous value structure and broad application. As for composition, David pushed it toward dissociated planar recession to a clearly defined background and away from connective diagonal movement into atmospheric infinity. All of this was assisted by an increasingly meticulous facture that suppressed broad brushwork in favor of carefully descriptive finish. What David and his contemporaries did not do was to abandon grayed and carefully modulated color values, and it is the continuation of this tradition that gives to neo-Classical painting the slightly yielding coherence which makes it a

link in the continuous chain of painting's development rather than a break in that chain. Although grays themselves became dense and individual hues tended to be relegated to discrete areas rather than being connected by painterly means, the hues chosen were not saturated but mixed and grayed so as to call to one another across the neutral backgrounds with which they formed a coherent unity. Not until the 1820's did color become saturated, enamel-like, and "neo-Classical," and by that time neo-Classicism itself was well on the way to the arid academicism in which it was to end.

The changes in the art of David and his contemporaries were, like all artistic change evolutionary, however revolutionary the end that was to obscure the beginning with its brilliance. Works by older artists and earlier works by neo-Classical artists foretell what was coming. In his portrait of Count Potocki (1780), for instance, David has already severely limited his space with a background wall that allows only a small area of sky to appear at the top of the composition. The foreground plane is firmly established by the fragmented dog at the lower left, and the equestrian subject of the picture is isolated between these two points of reference, filling the picture from edge to edge. Characteristic of David is the dappled pattern of lights and darks playing across the main subject and making it stand out from the background. The color modulations and vivacity of gesture, in both man and horse, however, show clearly how David continues to honor the Rococo. Making somewhat the same points with less finesse are such pictures as Drouais' *Marius at Minturnae* (1786) and Regnault's *Deluge* (1789). The former, particularly, shows how neo-Classical painting kept the gestural drama of the Rococo—unlike sculpture it never insisted on static poses—as well as its coloristic subtlety. The rich grayed orange and grayed blue of the drapery at the left is played off against the relatively saturated, but no less modulated, red at the right, the two linked by the bedding in the background and the tassel of the bed curtain. Coloristic atmosphere may be lacking, but coloristic subtlety and richness is still the vitalizing element of French painting. The *Deluge* shows more dramatically the tendency for lights and darks to separate into large discrete areas, and for figures to stand out sharply against backgrounds which seem to have as their purpose giving relief rather than context. The most masterful statement of these effects at this period is David's *Socrates Taking the Hemlock* (1787), which unites the devices seen more obviously in the work of others with a unique muted coloristic richness.

In addition to the general tendencies thus far observed, which continued at least through the end of the Empire, there were other threads that helped assure the continuation of the eighteenth-century tradition into the early nineteenth century. One of these was the direct inheritance of the Rococo vision by a number of less well known landscape and portrait painters, such as Gauffier, Valenciennes, and Bertin. Their pictures, often on a small scale and not infrequently backlit, are suffused with an atmospheric color-light that points directly to Corot. Another was the coloristic preference among certain of David's pupils, notably Gros and Gérard,

that sent them to the Rococo, or to its great progenitor Rubens, for models. While often neo-Classical in subject the work of these men placed particular emphasis on subtle color delicately grayed, and their compositions, while not as melting as those of Fragonard, tend to be developed entirely out of the resulting harmonies. Simultaneously, certain artists, such as Girodet and Prud'hon, took up the separation of lights and darks that functions in David's pictures to give the figures sculptural substance and to modulate the color, and used it as the major organizing principle in its own right. During this same period, there was a general tendency to restrict the number of hues in an individual composition and a pronounced preference for darker-valued, often monochrome-appearing, pictures. Finally, it was at this time that Ingres, generally regarded as the neo-Classical painter par excellence after David, came to maturity. However neo-Classical his draftsmanship, his profiles, and his imagery, Ingres was one of the supreme colorists of the nineteenth century, a mastery he owed directly to the eighteenth century as David preserved it. Most obvious in his portraits, in which a quiet range of browns, blacks, and muted yellows may be sparked with a touch of red, or in which a satin dress may be the excuse for a virtuoso excursus on shades of blue. Ingres colorism is even to be seen in such allegorical pictures as the high-valued *Jupiter and Thetis* of 1811. Thus, by the time of the Restoration and the onset of Romanticism, the coloristic tradition of the eighteenth century was still sufficiently alive to suggest how deep and powerful is the current that carries painting along, whatever storms may ruffle its surface.

In the second decade of the nineteenth century, the separation of lights and darks derived by Girodet and Prud'hon from David was made by Géricault into a monumental, Caravaggesque organizing principle. Restoring diagonal, Baroque-derived compositional structure in dark-valued pictures that are close to monochrome, Géricault ended by creating an oeuvre that stands more thoroughly apart from its time and from the general stream of painting's development than that of any other figure in the development of painting since the French Revolution. It was left to Delacroix to take this restored diagonal structure and marry it to David's tonal reversal (light foreground, dark background) in such relatively early pictures as *Greece Expiring on the Ruins of Missolonghi* (1826) and *Christ in the Garden of Olives* (1827-28). More important, Delacroix loosened brushwork again, introducing an actual thickness of pigment of which the Rococo and earlier artists would hardly have dreamed. Although certain masters—Rubens, Rembrandt, and Titian, for example—had used thick paint selectively, impasto as it is known today is largely an invention of the nineteenth century, particularly of Delacroix. In his canvasses, the Rococo coloristic tradition, transmitted by neo-Classicism, found new expression in areas of thick pigment which begin to take on the character of divorced color areas. This physical richness was to be combined by Impressionism with higher-valued color and greater tonal variety to bring back the Rococo's color atmosphere transformed. Thus, whatever changes in subject and composition extrinsic situations suggested or dictated, painting

continued on its way toward the liberation of color, creating a coloristic tradition sufficiently subtle and flexible, and sufficiently strong, to allow color to become the major determinant of pictorial composition. Both neo-Classicism and Romanticism are part of this trend, however they may seem opposed externally, and both are firmly rooted in the Rococo. While political events may suggest opposition as a developmental principle in late eighteenth and early nineteenth-century French painting, artistic events seem rather to propose a continuous experimental harmony. Although neither view is right to the exclusion of the other, the latter has almost certainly been unjustly neglected.

Notes on Contributors

STEPHEN JAMISON recently finished a first collection of poems, *Aron's Room*.

RADCLIFFE SQUIRES* is Editor of *Michigan Quarterly Review*.

IRVING SINGER is Professor of Philosophy at M.I.T. This essay will form part of a forthcoming book on the operas of Mozart and Beethoven.

JUDITH JOHNSON SHERWIN* has completed a novel and a third book of poems, *Waste*. She is President of the Poetry Society of America.

DAVID RAY's* most recent book is *Gathering Firewood: New Poems and Selected*, Wesleyan University Press.

RICHARD L. KENNEY* lives in Winoski, Vt. and has lived and worked on a farm, helped with apple press, cider jelly, and maple sugar operations. He has also worked as a log roller and board sawyer in

a small New Hampshire sawmill. His poems in this issue are his first to be published.

KATHRYN STRIPLING* is a graduate of the MFA writing program at UNC-Greensboro. She lives in Cullowhee, North Carolina.

WILLIAM H. YOUNGREN's essay on Bix Beiderbecke appeared in our Spring 1975 issue.

DEAN FLOWER* is Associate Professor of English at Smith College. He is currently working on a critical study of Nabokov.

PATRICIA MEYER SPACKS's new book, *Imagining A Self*, on autobiography and the novel, will be published by Harvard in the fall. *The Female Imagination* (Knopf) was a 1976 National Book Award nominee.

Asterisk indicates a new contributor.

Reviews

DEAN FLOWER

Fiction Chronicle¹

AMERICAN FICTION SEEMS ALIVE and well right now, not rising to greatness perhaps, but a patient doing nicely. The cancerous growth of pseudo-serious thrillers on the order of *Marathon Man* continues apace with *The Gemini Contenders* and countless others. There is the usual supply of those family-chronicle novels that grind slowly down through the generations, about characters named Gideon and Desirée and Lionel. There is a rash of self-consciously arty fiction, following either Faulkner (Audrey Thomas, *Blown Figures*) or Nabokov (John Mella, *Transformations*) or some other model of parodic-symbolic fabulism (Kafka? Borges? Vonnegut?), and it includes some promising and intelligent writers (Bernard Kaplan, *Obituaries*; Thomas Disch, *Getting Into Death*). And there has been a real epidemic of Women's Fiction, for transparently obvious reasons: Cynthia Ozick's *Bloodshed and Three Novellas*, Gail Godwin's *Dream Children*, Cecelia Holland's *Floating Worlds*, Harriet Hahn's *The Plantain Season*, and Lisa Alther's *Kinflicks*. The longest and most offensively bad of this mixed group is Alther's. Specimen of its plot: heroine living with her lesbian lover in a New Hampshire commune happens to fall innocently upon her bed beneath a certain dark and handsome townie. Instantly the lover returns, flies into a jealous rage, races off on the townie's snowmobile, and decapitates herself on the barbed-wire trap she has set for the Male Enemy. The best of the above lot is *The Plantain Season*: a breezy, believable first-person narration by an adolescent girl breaking away from home and becoming an adult. Without feminist grievances, Hahn is a novelist to watch. Works of more than routine interest, however, make their own categories, and deserve paragraphs to themselves.

Helen Yglesias writes narrative as if she had been doing it well all her life. One can only wonder about the long foreground that led up to *How She Died* (1972), which won a Houghton Mifflin Literary Fellowship Award, and now *Family Feeling*. She is the wife of novelist José Yglesias, and she dedicates her second novel to her three children. Perhaps, as one of her characters remarks about the narrator of *Family Feeling*, her children have been her novels, until now. Her subject is the growth and dispersal of

¹ FAMILY FEELING by Helen Yglesias. Dial Press. \$8.95. 1876 by Gore Vidal. Random House. \$10.00. THE AUCTIONEER by Joan Samson. Simon and Schuster. \$7.95. SITTING PRETTY by Al Young. Holt, Rinehart and Winston. \$7.95. LOOK HOW THE FISH LIVE by J. F. Powers. Knopf. \$6.95. DETAILS OF A SUNSET AND OTHER STORIES by Vladimir Nabokov. McGraw-Hill. \$8.95. WILL YOU PLEASE BE QUIET, PLEASE? by Raymond Carver. McGraw-Hill. \$8.95.

seven children born in Brooklyn of poor immigrant Jewish parents. It is told by the youngest child, Anne, in a fluid reminiscence that melds her past and present, her innocence and knowledge. Her memories circle back repeatedly to the deaths of the mother and father, to the antagonisms and dependencies of her youth that continue into her adult life, and to the choices she made in love and work: an unhappy marriage, two children, a divorce, and a patchwork literary career. Now much of this is familiar material, especially the all-forgiving mama and the difficult papa, a born loser; and its development follows a well-known course. The aggressive older brother, Barry, makes good, and gradually—it could only happen in America—everyone's rags are exchanged for relative riches. Yglesias masters this story by her relentless, almost Jamesian concentration on the issue of her title: the continuing power of family feeling to unite and divide, aggravate and bless, its members. The novel lucidly shows how family feeling disintegrates and then magically—or terribly?—renews itself.

Anne Morris Rossiter *née* Goddard limits the story of her life in the family to a series of linked vignettes, each of which is complete once the family feeling is tested. Why is it, she asks, that she still feels love and loyalty for her sister Shana who so envies and betrays her? Why is it that she as an adult is never credited with remembering what her older brothers and sisters do? Was it lack of family feeling in her that led her to marry Guy Rossiter, the WASP intellectual? And what draws her back to Barry, the millionaire brother who plays Godfather to them all? Why should she want *his* blessing? Such questions the novel poses deftly, from various angles. Scene after scene exposes the same familial web as it gathers and loosens its hold. There is the long reunion scene at Penn Station, awaiting Mama's coffin from Miami. There is the kitchen table discussion of Anne's schoolgirl lying. There is Barry taking Anne to the opera, he a young man on the make, anxious to impress his boss, but bored and uneasy surrounded by goyim. There is the reunion by telephone call, when the family members vote against participation in a spiteful lawsuit trumped up by a traitorous brother-in-law. Yglesias has a sure touch in these dramatic moments. She keeps our attention fixed on hypocrisies of gesture and voice, unspoken motives, and subtle positionings:

She has arrived at last at the center from which all Goddard energy radiates. It is time to greet Barry. She pauses, already worn out by the greetings accomplished. How will she ever get through the long day ahead? But her pause is for more than drawing breath. She pulls against a yearning to win a special greeting from Barry—in revulsion against another dive into those swirling waters where her brothers and sisters thrash about him, clutching and gasping, and she approaches Barry coolly, but when he responds in kind and kisses her without warmth, she is pinched with disappointment.

Smoothly shifting from present to past tenses (most of the novel is given in the present) and from "I" to "she" (producing subtle shifts in distance), the novel offers an almost continuous close-up, both dispassionate and intimate. Seldom is the narrator allowed any superiority of wisdom or self-control: "I love you," she blurts out to the virtual stranger who gives her pleasure, instantly regretting her words. Under her sister's skeptical glance she admits that she *did* want the money her father promised. The novel has a few vulnerabilities, and one may note certain false steps. Some chapters bear the special heading, "What's New With The Family?" But these prove to be no different in manner or method from the rest, and serve no function but that of an inappropriate irony. Also intrusive is a longish dissertation, toward the end of the novel, on the life of Frederick Law Olmsted. Its ostensible purpose is to extend the patriarchal theme to national proportions: how, in America, might *noblesse oblige*? Not without family feeling, Yglesias seems to say. But the Olmsted material grows tedious and the conclusion rings false: "My legendary grandfather, my real American hero, Frederick Law Olmsted, [says Anne] I want you to win." No, she wants her brother Barry to yield some token of humanity to her, to prove he has not hardened completely into the blind selfishness of American capitalism. Clearly there are Marxian solutions hovering here, threatening once more the integrity of her family feeling for America.

Gore Vidal's *1876* is an unusually crabbed performance, but like so many of Vidal's narratives it misfires interestingly. He describes it as the third installment of a trilogy centered in time between *Burr* and *Washington, D.C.* A few characters and families provide links between these three books, most notably the elderly narrator of *1876*, Charles Schermerhorn Schuyler, purportedly the by-blow of Aaron Burr. Schuyler has become an established historian and journalist in Paris. His return to America after four decades provides a convenient perspective, that of an urbane Rip Van Winkle, from which to view the decay of the Republic. That is Vidal's text. Also conveniently, he's out of pocket, burdened by a widowed daughter who must marry American dollars, and driven to write his way into some political preferment. Our disappointment is that no real story emerges. Schuyler's mode is largely jottings, hastily set down in his journal at night—a staccato, gossipy, but enervated style—which allows Vidal a free rein to say what he likes and justify nothing. Even the many conversations he reports tend to be kept sketchy, with minimal details of setting (just what we *don't* wish for, in a period piece). Yet this mode is credible enough, and suits well the narrator's acerbic and reductive skepticism. Hence the novel depends on the people in it to make it work. The aged William Cullen Bryant enlivens the early pages, with his comically fierce regimen of exercise and diet. Later on, glimpses of General Grant wrapt in brooding puzzled silences suggest another possible unifying figure:

this canny and deliberately dull little man . . . is, I would say, like the first Bonaparte, entirely immoral or amoral, but unlike the Emperor,

burdened with the Puritan's sense of sin and retribution. This combination can make for confusion.

It can also make for interesting action in an historical novel: why didn't Vidal choose such a figure? Another candidate for center stage is James G. Blaine, with his bright eyes, gross features, and organ-toned voice, clearly capable of seducing Dame Democracy. But the only hero to emerge is the dyspeptic Samuel Tilden, who is so gray and moribund at his first appearance (supine!) that we can only despair at his goodness when it fruitlessly appears. He comes alive at moments, as when he explains why he could never be a Republican (their "one real interest . . . is the making of special laws to protect their fortunes. . . . they have no compassion for the masses in this country who are without money . . ."), but he fails to fight for what he believes—even when elected by a popular majority. "I mean to do my very best to fire a majority of the people with a desire for true reform," he bravely declares. But that was not enough, Vidal shows, to beat the corrupt bosses who maneuvered Rutherford B. Hayes into the White House. And that is our history, Vidal seems to say with a cynical shrug: the endless corruptibility of a democratic ideal that failed to calculate for human evil. No wonder the novel is sour: 1876 is practically today. There are no heroes and no great actions. The whole shameful mess of the Tilden-Hayes election, like some omen of Watergate, provides the perfect anti-climax for this historical view. Vidal's only failure then lies in his ready surrender to historical fact. He fails to find any margin, as he did in *Burr*, where he may concoct extravagant-but-human possibilities. His narrator is too old for much more than a few healthful "seminal releases." His villain, one William Sanford, never proves actively vicious, despite his busy shape-shifting. Schuyler's daughter Emma, attracted to the corrupting powers in Washington, surrenders to them in getting herself a husband (or does she? Vidal muddies the real meaning here).

Despite the fact that he is extraordinarily well-informed on his period, Vidal refuses to take much enthusiasm in his documentary detail. There are Bouguereau nudes on barroom walls, newly-invented elevators in hotels, the sudden popularity of popcorn, and all the fashionable drinks and pain-killers. There are cameo appearances for all the appropriate people from Vanderbilts and Astors through Jay Gould, Mark Twain, Fanny Kemble, General Sherman, Mrs. Southworth, Horatio King, and (unnamed) Henry James, down to a scattering of hoboes and Civil War veterans. But Vidal has deliberately chosen against any manner of documentation—like Doctorow's, for example, or Dos Passos's—which implicitly celebrates the vitality of its subject. Repeatedly he undercuts our desire to glamorize the past: Mrs. Astor's dinners were boring and vulgar; Mark Twain was most of the time a cheap hypocrite; "the odour of Washington's imperfectly washed and laundered statesmen [was] oppressive" and their ladies looked "like so many farmers' wives in fancy dress." True, too true. Nobody is better than Gore Vidal at a trenchant, sneering criticism; but in this novel it fails to sting often enough. At one point

Schuyler tries out Vidal's former theory of history, which made *Burr* possible: "But there is no history, [he says] . . . only fictions of varying degrees of plausibility." But in this novel that theory is replaced by something grimmer: "if you want to know what Julius Caesar or James G. Blaine . . . is really like, then look in a mirror and study with perfect attention what is reflected there." Vidal has done this, and doesn't like what he sees.

Joan Samson's first novel, *The Auctioneer*, attracted a flurry of attention when it first appeared last winter, but subsequent reviews seem to have killed it. I think it deserves another look. The story concerns a rural New England community that falls prey to a smooth-talking auctioneer. Perly Dunsmore by name. Persuading everyone to donate cast-offs for his weekend auctions, Perly attracts an endless stream of city folk who hungrily buy all these tokens of pastoral simplicity. He quickly wedges his way into power in Harlowe, New Hampshire, finances new police and fire equipment, deputizes an assortment of the town's n'er-do-wells to keep down crime. Like any social blight, Perly gradually assumes control, promising everyone free balloons and square dancing, before people discover how much damage he's done. Soon he enforces weekly "donations"; every Thursday his truck appears like fate at John Moore's farm and others, and removes still more. Terrorizing and bringing "accidents" upon all who resist, Perly and his swaggering vigilantes strip bare the whole community, seizing all weapons, auctioning off furniture, appliances, produce, cattle, and tools, falsifying titles and selling land, and making way for a vast "land development" scheme. The reader must endure a certain agony of suspended disbelief as the *donnée* of this eerie fable is worked out: will any retaliation come in this plausible nightmare? Why must it be so slow in coming? One reviewer, C. D. B. Bryan, decided the novel fails because its premise is just too incredible. People whose license plates bear the slogan "Live Free or Die," Bryan argued, know how to stop interlopers like Perly Dunsmore or any other threat to their liberty. But I wonder if they invariably do, or always will. Or if that is quite what Samson's novel is about.

The implied fable of *The Auctioneer* is not so political as some readers like Bryan have supposed, first of all because (despite the title) its focus is not primarily upon Perly's charismatic powers. Rather it is on the Moore family—John and Miriam, their four-year-old daughter Hildie, and John's aged mother. Something of a cardboard Satan anyway, Dunsmore is kept offstage most of the time. The Moores, and other families like them, are estranged from any real sense of community: Mim is from another town; John is a loner with none of his mother's nostalgia for communal identity. The couple dreams of having a large family, of becoming a little pioneering world unto themselves, with the farm supplying all of their needs. Neither nature nor the economy cooperates; in fact, as Samson's skillful first chapter makes clear, their pastoral dreams are just as false as the images of it that Perly auctions off:

By the time Hildie was born, their plans had faded to an almost

forgotten ache, not from longing for a child so much as from a sense that they had been passed over by the rhythms of the earth, like the apple tree that blossomed so prettily but could not be coaxed to bear.

They take self-conscious pleasure in their old farmhouse, appreciating it more because city people do. Mim remarks, "what they're really after is to get to be like us." Literally, the Moores see their house through a sentimental fog. It seems a perfect, picturesque white cape, "all polished up" just as if, they joke, "summer folks had got their hands on it." The real fable here, as I read it, is the phony pastoralism of modern society, urban or rural. Only the child can point out, unwittingly, these illusions: "'It's gone!' she cried. 'The house is gone!'"

When John Moore and others finally try to strike back, their actions bespeak neither courage nor belief, only a cornered terror. Samson is firm about this. They cling to the illusion that their land at least will secure them, and like so many Flannery O'Connor landowners they must lose to learn otherwise. Only in an assembled group do they summon courage to face the auctioneer, unheroically ranged behind the defiant Mrs. Moore, who has nothing at stake but her nostalgic idealism. When at last they put Perly to flight, their released anxiety and hysteria produces the most dubious catharsis imaginable. They pillage and burn and kill with perfect futility. "The only thing we had to stop him was right," says Mrs. Moore wearily. "Now we gave that too." Written in a scrupulously plain style, with only the most meager colloquialisms for local color, *The Auctioneer* offers a grimly consistent moral fable for a centennial year. Here is how John Moore confronts his last illusion and, it may be, the nation's:

He saw all the cars and the dishwashers and the cabins on the lakes and the trips hither and yon in fancy trailers and he dismissed them as a fragile tower that could be toppled in a cold wind. He let the tables and chairs go, and the tools and machinery, and even the cows, because of the land. Because the land was free and clear. Because he believed that a good piece of land was the only true security there was—the only security a family needed.

That too, that above all, is vanity.

In a time when so much black fiction has collapsed into autobiography and rhetoric, and when every novel seems to be about some manchild or blueschild, it is wonderfully refreshing to read Al Young's third novel, *Sitting Pretty*. I don't know of any other black novel where the vernacular is used so well, unless it be in Young's own (*Snakes*, 1970, and *Who Is Angelina?*, 1975), and has anyone created a black protagonist over thirty? Sidney J. Prettymon, alias Sitting Pretty, a. k. a. Sit, is fifty-five, and he tells his own story—covering about a year in his life—into a tape recorder. The form is Huckleberry Finn's, as the epigraph from Twain announces ("if I'd a knowed what a trouble it was to make a book I wouldn't a

tackled it”), but the lingo is straight out of Redd Foxx, Scatman Crothers, and the street. Sit is funny, ribald, tender, confused, full of “off the wall” wisdom and unanswered questions. He drifts uncertainly among smart, successful people who think they know who they are. He still loves his wife in San Francisco, though they’ve been separated for years, and he’s proud of his successful, grown-up children, but he lives alone in a Palo Alto hotel with other drifters, apparently a failure as a husband, father, and wage-earner. He would really like to justify himself and make amends, Herzog-like:

... I’d done been thru a hard week, got in a argument with Aristotle, my son. He a lawyer. Got a pretty good practice goin up in Oakland with a coupla other sharp young dudes. It really hurt me some of the stuff he said—bout how I never encouraged him or his sister and how I walked off and left they mother and them stranded to make ends meet. He dont really understand how it went down. If it’s the last thing I do I gotta make him and Cornelia see how I am not the irresponsible villain they mama Squirrel like to make me out to be.

He’s vulnerable and generous, charming enough to get entangled in affairs, opinionated enough to become a notorious caller in a radio talk show, smart enough to quote Emerson and study *go Days to a More Powerful Vocabulary*. He would like to be sitting pretty, but he’s wise enough to know that “deep down someplace” everyone is “probly hurtin and doubtin the validity of all his so-call accomplishments.” So he loves his wife and children, and admires their accomplishments, but he won’t follow their formulas—nor anyone else’s.

Although the novel isn’t profound in its other characterizations, nor the least bit subtle in its satiric targets, it is rich in interesting, believable people. There is the evil-looking Broadway, with his chartreuse jump-suit and five-inch platform heels: “Fact, that’s all he is is this one big attitude struttin around held together by breath and britches and a awful lotta nerve.” There is Willie G., who changes jobs (and neckties and girls) almost as recklessly as he switches lanes on the freeway: “just so he can feel like he the leader of the pack or some fool nonsense.” There is the pipe-smoking son-in-law, Marcus, who gets rich thinking about Urban Systems: “To put it succinctly, [he says,] studies have indicated the need for effective and efficient alternatives to the deteriorative trend which our major cities are presently reflecting in their rapid decline.” There is the high-yaller Marguerite, passing for white as a rich Atherton lady, with her “immature womb” and her poodle named Désirée, while her fifth marriage disintegrates. There is a neurotic hippie, Adele, who lures and rejects: “Like a lotta pretty people, it’s a good deal of ugliness I can see in her chocolate Anglo features.” The only character given more depth is Sit’s wife, who seems to love him still; but what she wants is “to serve God by doing right by Frazier [her man now] and the kids and our grandchildren.” Each character closes out Sitting Pretty like this; they can’t live

with his doubt, and he can't live with their certainty. He would like love and success, but not at the cost of peace of mind and the freedom to be himself.

The beauty of Young's vernacular method is that it brings alive a thoroughly engaging human being. Maintaining the mask with perfect consistency, however, Young avoids all moral issues. In a sense that's a strength: there can be nothing pretentious about *Sitting Pretty* nor about what he learns at last, that he must take life "a little at a time and do the best [he] can." He understands from life what he read in Emerson, that "It's always another side to everything and everybody." But the weakness here is that we can take it or leave it; there is no moral sense implied by the whole novel other than the implicit celebration of one man's miraculous humanity. It has no political or social moral for blacks, other than the knowledge that "You can't win." Given those limitations, it's a delightful and for my ear a wholly convincing performance; but I could be deceived.

The slender production of J. F. Powers over the last thirty years has never been a discredit to him. Until now, I regret to say. *Look How the Fish Live* contains all of Powers' stories, including the briefest satiric sketches, written since 1957. Seven of them are substantial enough to bear comparison with his earlier work, but the comparison is disheartening. It proves that Powers has lost his formerly decisive control, has soured in his sense of humor, and deeply undercut his previous moral clarities. One has only to compare Father Eudex, the young curate of "The Forks" (1947), with his recent counterparts to measure the loss. Immature though Eudex was, fresh from the seminary and finding deadly sin rampant among his superiors, he still rightly loathed the collusion of church and big business, and flushed his Christmas check down the toilet. New curates now are depicted as fraudulent liberals. One of them proudly refuses to type a letter, "like somebody who brushes his teeth with table salt," Powers sneers. When his pastor complains, the curate replies, "you should've put in for a stenographer, not a priest." See how the issues have degenerated? In other stories the Eudex prototype is used to parody the Church's empty modernism. Potter, Schmidt, and Beeman are all easy targets for this satire in "One of Them." Potter advocates opening confessional doors to show that "Jahweh" is "not within but on the altar."

"Wow," said Schmidt, who was under Potter's influence.

*

Potter produced a copy of the Holy Sepulchre parish bulletin, the entire contents being just one word spread over four pages, a letter to a page, LOVE.

"Wow," said Schmidt.

Beeman shows a trace of the old Eudex spunk, but it's no longer admirable. Sneaking back to the rectory after a night out drinking, he answers the pastor's "Is that you, Father?" by throwing a shoe at his enemy. His

replacement prudently learns to be like his pastor, a man of few words, which Powers seems to find admirable. But Beeman is potentially the better man, and always the more interesting one. He answers the domestic tyrannizing of the housekeeper by pounding on the wall, and when he comes back to find his unlucky shoe he drops such phrases as "Going by the flight pattern." Why isn't some part of this maverick's energy good? The clergy has gone to the dogs, Powers keeps showing, but he refuses to put any of the blame on pastors whose deepest calling is to the zoo or to their Barcalounger chairs.

Another Powers prototype is the nameless pastor of "A Losing Game" (1955), who conducted his impatient young curate on a safari through the rectory basement, equipped with pellet gun and air rifle against the possibility of rats, in quest of a typing table. Also a man of comically few words, this pastor won our admiration by his charming other-worldliness and kindly good-intentions. He did not even know what a typing table might look like, much less why his curate would want one. His recent avatars are just as taciturn and close their doors just as firmly against their eager young curates, but without any compensating humanity. One of them endlessly maneuvers to find out his curate's full name, playing in role only the Otherworldly Incurious Pastor. Another pastor breaks silence at last to advise his curate about being civil to the housekeeper; "Have to watch ourselves. Father. As men. More, as priests. Get careless. Get coarse. Live like bears." This is meant to be both funny and morally good, but it comes out neither. The pastor's "humane" interest in animals is only a private obsession, and brings him no closer to the human world. More alarming still is the defensive mimicry of his intelligent young curate, Simpson, who now uses those one- and two-word sentences too. It's difficult to see that he's learned anything more than a spiritual miserliness:

"Thanks," said Simpson.

"Pooh!" said Ms. Burke.

"Uh" said the pastor.

There can be no real comedy and no purpose in satire when the fresh young curates are stupid and the wise old pastors are morally and spiritually sterile.

The title story, "Look How the Fish Live," presents directly the point of view that goes so completely awry elsewhere in the book. A Minnesota man's house and large lot are doomed to be bulldozed into a university parking lot. The man worries about the creatures in his yard, about his trees that commit "herbal suicide," about a crippled young dove that dies, about his children who don't care enough about the dove. He is angry at neighbors who don't worry about atomic-bomb fallout, and at another neighbor—organizing for civil defense—who apparently does. He tries to save the dove, but soaks his yard with gallons of DDT against the mosquitoes, floods the gophers "out of their labyrinthine ways," and

"purges" red squirrels from the house. He's a man with a grievance: "That was the balance of nature for you," he mutters, or ruefully, "Nature had simply failed again." The irony here is obviously that of a self-fulfilling prophecy, as the author knows well. But Powers has nothing against which to play this irony. It becomes his truth. The man says, "I'm sick of it all." He blames nature, children, men, women ("They," he comically reasons, "were responsible for children and the success of *Queen for a Day*"):

Who *was* left? God. It wasn't surprising, for all problems were at bottom theological. He'd like to put a few questions to God. God, though, knowing his thoughts, knew his questions, and the world was already in possession of all the answers that would be forthcoming from God.

Like a modern Goodman Brown, this man lacks the courage of real belief or final rejection, and prefers instead the limbo of his gloom. The portrait is sour but convincing. And as the rest of this veritable Book of Thersites bears out, it is a self-portrait.

Vladimir Nabokov's recent novels in English have not won him many converts nor have they discouraged the view that his art is mere artificial gamesmanship of a wholly self-congratulating type. Yet that view is at best deficient, as any reader of *Lolita* knows at once, and therefore it's good to have another example now to prove it. *Details of a Sunset and Other Stories* is Nabokov's last volume to be translated from the Russian, a process he began fourteen books ago with *Invitation to a Beheading* (1959). Eight of these thirteen stories were first published in Germany between 1924 and 1927 and only one is as recent as 1935, but the remarkable thing about them all is their closeness to his later work. Even if we allow for the transforming effects of his mature English style, with its precise verbs (*stridulate*) and its vibrant clarity of color and line (details *penciled* and *gilt-edged*), these tales still seem uncannily recent. When "paradisaical lozenges" of stained glass appear here, in stories of 1924 and 1931, it is as if they were calculated anticipations of the same motif in *Ada* (1969) and *Look at the Harlequins* (1974). The truth is much simpler: Nabokov recognized his special themes early and remained obsessed by them. The dislocations of exile, memory's graceful powers, the solipsist's prison, death as metamorphosis, the artifice of Fate—all of Nabokov's familiar concerns are here, in a series of deft, unpretentious sketches.

Several are unabashedly romantic. "A Letter that Never Reached Russia" is an ecstatic outpouring of happiness from one surrounded by reminders of death and despair, who yet glories in the magic of the quotidian. Another story offers an elegant compliment to a thunderstorm. Anticipating the "nostalgia for the present" of a 1945 story, "A Guide to Berlin" is bathed in childlike wonder, as deliberately naive as Sherwood Anderson or W. C. Williams. It does no more than "portray ordinary objects as they will be reflected in the kindly mirror of future times." Such stories are a useful reminder of how much energy Nabokov devotes not to

fictive strategem but to the simple unexpected beauty of homely things—asphalt, puddles, stacks of pipe—things we fail really to see.

The best stories here travel into peculiarly transcendental realms where consciousness lingers, souls stretch their mothly wings, and death loses its sting. In “Christmas” a father grieving over his son’s death finds nothing but misery as he goes through the boy’s things (books, lepidist gear, dry cocoon) and remembers the boy’s final delirium (about school, a bicycle, some Oriental moth). But in the suddenly warm room the cocoon opens, and what seemed only a brown folded leaf becomes “a great *Attacus* moth like those that fly, birdlike, around lamps in the Indian dusk.” In “Details of a Sunset” a young man about to be cruelly jilted suffers a different surprise: he’s killed jumping from a streetcar, which allows him a portmortal fantasy of completing the happy tryst he had anticipated. In “The Return of Chorb” a mild madman born in the pages of Gogol and Poe refuses to tell anyone when his young bride dies on their honeymoon. Chorb wants to “possess his grief all by himself.” Step by step he reverses the honeymoon, obviously preferring the second experience to the first, until he reaches the marriage bed in a seedy hotel. Now he hires a prostitute, who watches him get into bed and fall quickly asleep. When he awakens later to find her sleeping beside him, he utters a “ghastly deep-drawn howl,” stares at her in abject horror, and then oddly the whole ordeal is over. But how will he explain to her anxious parents that her image has now been “made perfect”? It’s one of the funniest versions of the Romantic Idealist fable—the exorcism of mortal taint—and interestingly anticipates Humbert and a number of other unhappy lovers to come. In “The Passenger” a novelist listens all night to the wracking sobs of a mysterious passenger in an upper berth. The train is halted and searched for a man who killed his wife and her lover. To his delight, the novelist learns that the man in the upper berth is *not* the murderer: life does not imitate the clichés of art. But a critic who listens to the writer’s tale argues that the first ending is better. Make the passenger into a murderer, he says, because words are “given the sublime right to enhance chance and to make of the transcendental something that is not accidental.” Nabokov has followed that logic ever since. In “A Busy Man” a thirty-three year old hack writer becomes obsessed with his own death and begins to find omens of it in everything he does. His only relief from this referential mania (cf. “Signs and Symbols,” 1948) comes in writing certain foolish couplets. When he survives the fateful year, however, his life empties of all meaning and he becomes one “whose soul has gone to sleep like a leg.” Nabokov points a moral here that he would later learn to hide: that the proper business of a “busy man” is with his own soul:

We are discussing the air holes of life, a dropped heartbeat, pity, the interruptions of past things—what fragrance is that? What does it remind me of? And why does no one notice that on the dullest street every house is different, and what a profusion there is . . . on every object, of seemingly useless ornaments—yes, useless, but full of disinterested, sacrificial enchantment.

That is what Humbert noticed too, in the margins of his journey across America, "inutile loveliness," and that is what Nabokov creates at his romantic best.

The influence of such writers as Borges, Nabokov, and Barthelme has not been salutary for recent American fiction, especially the short story. It has produced, as John Barth was probably the first to recognize, a "literature of exhaustion": beset by self-reflexive ingenuities, laden with allusions, sterile in its own sophistication, its own awareness of dead end. Remarkably few writers have been able, in the short story form at least, to say much about the way we live now. Raymond Carver is a significant exception, and his methods are wholly his own. He has been publishing stories since 1963, largely in such places as *Northwest Review*, *Iowa Review*, and *Esquire*, and now twenty-two of them are collected in *Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?* In their terse objectivity as well as subject matter (fathers and sons, marriages at impasse, Indians, boys fishing, insomniacs) these episodes suggest Carver as a descendent of Hemingway, relocated in the Pacific Northwest. But where Hemingway's purified style was meant to imply volumes of unspoken knowledge, like the seven-eighths of an iceberg underwater, Carver's method suggests that the other seven-eighths either isn't there or isn't knowable.

Carver is expert at describing various types of emotional parasitism. "Neighbors" is about the Millers who envy their interesting, much-travelled neighbors. Asked to feed the cat while their friends are away, the Millers begin spending time furtively across the hall, trying on clothes, lying in the bed, using the bathroom—and it all proves powerfully erotic. In "The Idea" another couple watches a neighbor stealing out to spy on his own wife as she undresses:

"Look at him," Vern said. Vern was smoking, knocking the ash into his hand when he needed. He held the cigaret away from the window when he puffed. Vern smokes all the time; there's no stopping him. He even sleeps with an ashtray three inches from his head. At night I'm awake and he wakes up and smokes.

"By God," Vern said.

"What does she have that other women don't have?" I said to Vern after a minute.

They might almost be watching television. They are the victims of our whole predictable, pointless culture, however, not just of television or the movies. They can't find their own emotions and don't know what is the matter. In another story a husband hangs around the coffee shop where his wife is a waitress, hoping to overhear lewd remarks about her. In another a wrong number leads to a titillating conversation, but the erotic promise vanishes in a painfully real meeting. Another man plans to go duck hunting but comes home from work early when someone dies. Unaware that his boredom is disturbance, he spends an aimless evening thinking about going to Reno, duck hunting, moving north, having sex with his wife. All he does is smoke cigarettes, try to read a few poems,

listen to the rain, stare at the wall. Carver's gift is to make these routine emptinesses terrible. In another story a bankrupt man sends his wife out to sell their flashy convertible, then suffers all night in the knowledge that she's whoring with car salesmen.

Carver's characters frequently discover violence in themselves, alarmingly close to the surface. But it is a weak-kneed violence, shaken by cowardice, and they do their best to dispose of it quickly. An Indian threatens two boys hunting on his reservation, surprising himself with a rage that doesn't seem his own. A father's anger over a stranger's wild accusations of his son erupts into a fist fight when he accidentally steps off a porch into some prickly bushes. Ironically, the son is very proud of his father's bravery. A man whose security is badly threatened focuses his wrath on the family dog, but he can't bring himself to do anything more violent than leave the animal in his old neighborhood, where he knows someone will care for it. The story is really about his terror at the deadly entrapments of his life and his unconscious attempts to erase that terror by reverting to a past self. Some of Carver's best stories—and there are many—transform the dreadful ordinariness of modern life into something altogether baffling. In this they suggest a possible debt to Pinter's plays. In "Collectors" a young man waiting for the mail, out of work, endures the visit of a vacuum cleaner salesman who gives all the rugs and mattresses a free cleaning. But he's no ordinary salesman. He explains the carpet slippers he wears by a reference to W. H. Auden travelling in China. Later, out of the blue, he offers the wisdom that "Rilke lived in one castle after another, all of his adult life." And he laughs for no discernible reason:

What's so funny? I said.

Nothing. Lord, he said. He laughed again. I think I'm losing my mind. I think I have a fever.

Once he offers his philosophy of vacuuming: "Every day, every night of our lives, we're leaving little bits of ourselves, flakes of this and that, behind." When he leaves, he takes a letter the mailman has just delivered, folds it, and puts it in his pocket. "I'll see to it," he explains. The young man makes no move to stop him." Most of these stories are very short; all of them are written in a factual, unadorned style that never offers to explain, never indulges in commentary. As in a relentless close-up, we hear and see exactly what these people do, but why they do it—or whether anything intelligible goes through their minds as they do it—we cannot confidently explain. Carver's is an art of disconcerting, and he's very good at it.

PATRICIA MEYER SPACKS

The Art of Life

BIOGRAPHIES OF OUR CULTURAL GIANTS, multiplying, remind us how many plots inhere in the events of a given life. The recent heightened awareness of special conditions governing the experience of women has proliferated re-tellings, re-imaginings of female lives in particular: such figures as Mary Wollstonecraft (subject of two biographies in the last few years), Margaret Sanger, Virginia Woolf, and George Sand have had their histories brought up to date; now George Eliot (whose expertly-written and-researched biography by Gordon Haight appeared in 1968), Charlotte Brontë (her story voluminously told by Winifred Gérin in 1967), and Edith Wharton join the list.¹ The current biographers of Eliot and Brontë have no significant new facts to offer; they have new *stories*. All three of these biographies raise the question of story's proper function and status in the biographer's imaginative appropriation of someone else's life.

Giving comprehensible shape to multiple detail, story in its nature combines the general and the particular. It interprets experience by assimilating it to patterns derived from the laws of human nature. Biography, with its claim of "truth," implicitly promises through its stories revelations of immediate significance. Describing how people have actually lived, it tells us of ourselves: a large responsibility, and one which the three books at hand evade by the various inadequacies of the stories they construct, stories which insufficiently contain the implications of their data.

Three biographies are better than one for purposes of generalization. Reading in conjunction the lives of several women writers, one can begin to speculate about the conditions of female creativity. Besides their literary gifts, Eliot, Brontë, and Wharton apparently shared certain patterns of relationship. All had emphatic ties to their fathers. The two Victorian women lived lives of filial devotion. Widowed when Charlotte was five years old, Patrick Brontë expected of her and of his other daughters the care and devotion which his wife had earlier supplied. Charlotte, who survived longest, provided for him most lavishly. When she married, at the age of thirty-eight, her father summoned her back from her honeymoon on pretext of illness. In a letter written on her wedding trip she observed, "I feel very anxious about Papa—the idea of his illness has followed me all through my journey and made me miserable sometimes when otherwise I should have been happy enough." George Eliot, in her earlier avatar as Marian Evans, deprived of her mother at the age of sixteen, nursed and tended her father through his late years although he had long since

¹ GEORGE ELIOT: *The Emergent Self*, by Ruby V. Redinger. Knopf. \$10.95. UNQUIET SOUL: *A Biography of Charlotte Brontë*, by Margot Peters. Doubleday. \$12.00. EDITH WHARTON: *A Biography*, by R.W.B. Lewis. Harper & Row, \$15.00.

demonstrated his insensitivity to her needs and nature. When he died she was almost thirty. She wrote to friends, on the day of his death, "I had a horrid vision of myself last night becoming earthly sensual and devilish for want of that purifying restraining influence." Edith Wharton, born almost half a century after the other two, had a yet more ambiguous relationship with her father, who died when she was nineteen. She believed of him, as she testified long afterward, that he suffered from "stifled cravings," smothered by her mother; that he was a man "haunted by something always unexpressed and unattained." One of her last pieces of writing, composed when she was seventy-three or seventy-four, was a plan for a tale of father-daughter incest. The surviving fragment reports with pornographic explicitness (although highly romanticized tone) the physical encounter of father and daughter.

Such a piece of literary evidence of course stresses the sexual component of the father-daughter link, but the more discreet testimony of Wharton's Victorian predecessors also has sexual implications. George Eliot's fear that she might lapse into devilish sensuality without her father's "restraining influence," Charlotte Brontë's inability to enjoy her honeymoon for worrying about her father's cold: both hint that the paternal presence, real or imagined, interferes with or substitutes for less regressive liaisons. And indeed Edith Wharton's marriage proved virtually or entirely sexless, although she had, in her forties, one passionate love affair; Eliot's bond to George Henry Lewes, according to her new biographer, involved little passion, despite "the strong passions within her"; Brontë's brief marriage left no evidence of sexual satisfaction or happiness.

All three women, moreover, had unsatisfactory mothers—Brontë's "unsatisfactory" mainly in dying so early; the others failing to supply their daughters' emotional needs. Wharton perceived her mother as cold, limited, unimaginative, and destructive, recalling many years after her death her maternal inadequacies. Eliot probably felt rejected by a mother who, lapsing early into semi-invalidism, displayed a marked preference for her son; the Eliot fictional heroines, as Redinger points out, almost never have adequate mothers—if, indeed, they are provided with any mother at all.

Each of these writers' families, finally, contains at least one brother who assumes great emotional significance in his sister's life. The saga of Branwell Brontë has been lavishly reported: several sisters (the number diminishing as they died one by one) and a father devoting themselves to the apparently quite imaginary "genius" of the dissipated, irresponsible, romantic young man. George Eliot's brother Isaac, who refused to have any contact with her through twenty-three years of her liaison with Lewes, on grounds of his immorality, even in their childhood could devastate his sister by his actual or threatened anger. Edith Wharton preserved no close relationship with her oldest brother, Freddy, but her brother Harry, twelve years older than she, provided the single "warming presence" of her lonely childhood. Lewis also reports, without comment, that Harry called his sister "John" because he detected "the streak of virile toughness that lay behind her enjoyment of pretty dresses."

One can only speculate about what connection may exist between such family constellations and the peculiarly intense longing for love that each biographer detects in the life being studied. Harriet Martineau, Charlotte Brontë's contemporary, complained about the fact that the need to be loved dominated all the novelist's heroines—a trait which Martineau professed to consider unrealistic in relation to the actual nature of women. "Charlotte craved love and gave love," Peters comments, "as only a person who is uncertain of winning it can." George Eliot's feelings, Redinger observes, "betrayed her by rushing out in every possible direction in search of love." Edith Wharton, in later life so stiff in manner that her French friends said she looked as though she had swallowed an umbrella, confided to Bernard Berenson that "all she really expected from her friends was that they spend time with her and love her." More or less consciously, all three women used their writing as a means of gaining—or imagining gaining—the approval, the emotional involvement, the passionate admiration of thousands of readers. George Eliot's pathological sensitivity to negative criticism, Edith Wharton's crazed complaints that her publishers never advertised enough, Charlotte Brontë's desperate rage at Martineau's comments on her treatment of love: such phenomena emphasize the special personal meaning of critical approval to these writers.

Although Redinger insistently offers a specific theory about George Eliot's creativity, none of these biographers speculates seriously about whether a woman's writing has special sources and meanings, for the individual subject or for the sex at large: a point which suggests their apparent reluctance to face the broad implications of their narratives. The biographies provide, as I have tried to demonstrate, promising raw material for provocative generalization about such matters, suggesting the possibility that one might seek origins of female creativity in special attachments, or yearnings for attachment, of daughters to fathers. But the books fail themselves to articulate patterns adequate to organize detail into meanings of larger scope. Each provides an interpretative story which does not interpret enough of the matter it must include.

The difficulty about *Unquiet Soul* emerges in the very title, its plaintive romanticism suggesting an oddly old-fashioned view of the writer as heroine. The biography, however, purports to be very up to date, perceiving Charlotte Brontë as a "feminist" because her "life and art were both an eloquent protest against the cruel and frustrating limitations imposed upon women and a triumph over them." Peters criticizes the sentimentality of those attracted to the Brontë sisters by the glamor of their suffering, but she evokes a new sentimentality about womanhood. This too depends upon the attraction of suffering, attributing the pain of a woman's experience automatically to the fact of her sex. The story of Charlotte Brontë, as here related, is much too simple—and peculiarly frustrating because its writer shows at least rudimentary awareness that the subject's gender may have special significance. She asserts its meaning, however, in painfully predictable terms, telling us, for example, without substantiation, that Charlotte's youthful fantasy-figure of Za-

morna "was all she longed to be—rich, despotic, adored, sinning, and masculine." She remarks of the publisher George Smith's first reaction to Charlotte, "It was a woman's fate, then as now, to be judged by her looks rather than her mind . . . : nothing about her struck him so much as the fact that she somehow sinned in not being pretty." (What Smith actually wrote lends itself to a much more complex point about the female situation: commenting on Brontë's "excessive anxiety about her personal appearance," he concludes, "Perhaps few women ever existed more anxious to be pretty than she, or more angrily conscious of the circumstance that she was *not* pretty.") Peters even castigates her subject for failing to realize that Branwell's innamorata Lydia Robinson and her daughters were "slaves of a class system that bought and sold women."

Such examples suggest how automatically the biographer imposes her mold of "feminism" on the life she describes. One longs for more searching reflection on the subjective meaning of the author's lack of conventional beauty (particularly in relation to George Smith's perception of her *anger*), or of her response to Lydia Robinson's sexual "betrayal" of the beloved brother. Irritation mounts as the facile interpretations multiply. Finally they seriously damage the biography, when Peters shows herself able to understand Brontë's late marriage only through feminist cliché. "Just as surely as Mary Ann Evans' union with Lewes expanded her powers, Charlotte's marriage to Nicholls blighted the great powers of Currer Bell." This assertion rests on Brontë's epistolary reports of her busy existence as a clergyman's wife and on her observation, six weeks after her marriage, that women should not be indiscriminately urged to marry because "it is a solemn and strange and perilous thing for a woman to become a wife." "Would Nicholls have permitted her to write?" Peters inquires. And again: "was her death to be in a sense voluntary—an unconscious solution to an unsolvable conflict—as she felt it—between her art and her marriage?"

Charlotte Brontë died, of an illness associated with pregnancy, less than eleven months after her marriage. She had begun writing a new novel, reading the first ten pages to her husband. On her death bed, she is reported to have said, "Oh, I am not going to die, am I? He will not separate us, we have been so happy." The evidence reveals no unsolvable conflict between her art and her marriage, no blighting of powers—except, of course, by the definitive conclusion of death. She had hardly had time to work out the new dynamics of marriage, had barely apprehended that "solemn and strange and perilous" state. Surely those adjectives allude not (as Peters oddly appears to believe) to the domestic and social responsibilities of her lot but to the emotional reverberations of enacted sexuality—a potential new theme for her fiction, which had always expressed rich awareness (a fact which Harriet Martineau recognized) of sexual feeling demanding channels. Peters feels certain that Arthur Nicholls would not have permitted his wife to write honestly about marriage. But the details of Charlotte Brontë's life emphatically demonstrate that no one *ever* interfered significantly with what she wanted to say: not even the father whose opinion she passionately valued. To understand

the final stage of the novelist's experience through romantic feminism reduces human complexity to political parable.

The story Peters tells is far less compelling than the material of which she makes it; the biography's merit derives almost entirely from its provision of data more suggestive than its author realizes. (One might also complain, on the other hand, that the biographer feels so dedicated to her sentimental tale that she sometimes displays a cavalier disregard for fact: the reader must deduce the date of Charlotte's birth.) Quotations from the novelist's letters are often compelling, with precisely the vigor, the sense of special personality, that mark her fiction at its best. The extraordinary achievement of Charlotte Brontë's final novel, *Villette*, depends on its relentless insistence on the significance of emotion—all emotion—as psychic fact. The letters here quoted manifest the same respect for feeling, the same unusual capacity to value personal experience whatever its pain or its deviation from conventional expectations about how one should think and feel. Their precision of self-observation makes them moving: "The evils that now and then wring a groan from my heart—lie in position—not that I am a *single* woman and likely to remain a *single* woman but because I am a *lonely* woman and likely to be *lonely*." "Now that he [James Taylor, a suitor] is away I feel far more gently towards him—it is only close by that I grow rigid—stiffening with a strange mixture of apprehension and anger—which nothing softens but his retreat and a perfect subduing of his manner." They insist on the importance of psychological rather than social fact, declaring the intricate kind of truth too often sadly missing from this biography.

If Peters's narrative of Charlotte Brontë's restricted life is marred by flabby sentimentality, Ruby Redinger's claustrophobic account of George Eliot's much fuller existence suffers from almost desperate rigidity: another kind of inadequate story. The biographer's obsessional commitment to her own vision of a shaped life dictates every sentence. Marian Evans became George Eliot and achieved fulfillment, this interpretation would have it, by inevitable and complex logic, of character and of circumstance. "Through adult love and the unconscious therapy of creative writing"—love and work, the occupations of maturity defined by Freud—she won an "inner poise" impossible for her in her youth, arduously maintained. Her life becomes a paradigm of female salvation through creativity.

Often intelligent and persuasive, this study traces in detail the minutiae composing the paradigm: the childhood attachments, which must partly be deduced from such evidence as Eliot's "Brother and Sister" sonnet sequence, the conflicts over religion with her father, the slow development of intellectual mastery, the grotesque love relationship with John Chapman (already provided with wife and mistress) and the even more baffling tie to Herbert Spencer, the young woman's brilliant editorial work at the *Westminster Review*, her extra-legal "marriage" to Lewes, her evolving career as fiction-writer, her marriage, after Lewes's death, to a man twenty years her junior. In her twenties, Marian Evans formed intense relationships with women, the language of her letters startlingly sexual in implication: "I come back to you with all a husband's privileges and

command you to love me I sometimes talk to you in my soul as lovingly as Solomon's Song." Later, she attached herself more trustingly to men: the *Westminster Review* period was one of close professional and personal association with males. All these stages of development and the emotional manifestations associated with them seem at once uniquely personal and typically Victorian: but Redinger doesn't seem to know this. If the facts declare the complexities of Marian Evans's psychic development, they also remind us of the intellectual, social, and moral complexities characteristic of much experience in the middle and late nineteenth century. The crisis over religious faith, the conflicts of intellectual allegiance: we know of such matters from Tennyson and Darwin. The "free love" solution of Lewes's marital dilemma belongs to the era in which John Stuart Mill was declaring the rights of women; it would have proved impossible a century earlier. The passionate relationships with other women, sexual in feeling though not in action, represent permitted outlets for female emotions in this era at once restrictive and adventurous. Redinger's apparent unawareness of such truths creates the effect earlier called *claustrophobic*: avoiding the vague social theorizing that mars the Peters book, she lacks any manifest awareness that her heroine inhabited a specific social context implying far more than the suppression of women.

But the impression of claustrophobia derives from what is included as well as what is omitted, from the biographer's insistent sequence of "could have been," "must have been," "might have been," "probably." Margot Peters says "we can guess" that Brontë's face beneath her pink silk bonnet did not smile on a certain occasion. Redinger's guesses involve weightier matters: the effect of a mother's rejection ("enough to scar" her daughter "for life"), the sources of early guilt, the need to conceal aggression or to assert femininity, what Virginia Woolf had read to evoke her judgment of Eliot. "It is impossible to say," Redinger confesses, "whether George Eliot's death in late 1880 was a consequence of the loss of her creative life." She clearly wishes to imply exactly this. More daringly, and more disturbingly: "On the basis of the indirect evidence available, the George Eliot novels would not have come into existence had she married Spencer." *Disturbing* because the statement reveals a writer self-deluded by her thesis. Obviously no kind of evidence (what would "direct" evidence comprise in such a case?) can prove what would have happened if a human being followed a different course from his or her actual one. But the statement has the tone of assertion, not speculation. A reader of this biography must be very alert to separate fact from dogmatically-presented opinion.

The "evidence" here piled to substantiate a theory of triumphantly logical personal development is often distorted—particularly the evidence from George Eliot's own writing. Thus we are told (again in the authoritative tone) that a fictional character "is suddenly the essence of Chapman, Isaac . . .—and anyone else who had been miserly in returning love with love." Or told of Mrs. Tulliver in *The Mill on the Floss* that in a given scene she is "not really Mrs. Tulliver" at all, but "an imperative created out of the dynamics of the scene." "The transformation of Silas's guineas

into the child Eppie," we learn, "justifies George Eliot's seeking and accepting money for her writing." To reduce imaginative literature to illustrations of a personal history violates literary sensibilities without illuminating life. One feels trapped in Ruby Redinger's fantasies and separated from the personality they are intended to illuminate.

Here as in the Brontë biography, the central character sheds more light on herself than the biographer has under control. Redinger quotes lavishly from Eliot's thoughtful letters, always rich in implication. Particularly revealing are excerpts from two of the novelist's critical essays, one (1854) on "Woman in France," the other, written two years later, on "Silly Novels by Lady Novelists." Writing about the literary accomplishment of French women, Eliot praises their courage in being willing to write as members of their sex, "without affecting manly views or suppressing womanly ones." But she also sees that they have profited from being allowed common ideas and interests with men, opportunities of which their English counterparts have been deprived. Recognizing in her treatment of lady novelists the temptations offered by the apparent "absence of rigid requirement" for the novel, she implies again her belief in the necessity of intellectual discipline, her sense that the indulgences allowed to women create their restrictions. Wanting women to function as women—wanting, clearly, to function as a woman herself—she implies an imagined reconciliation of intellectual range and rigor with emotional vitality. The search for such a reconciliation, for more inclusive versions of the harmony adumbrated in the union with Lewes which filled both emotional and intellectual needs, dominated much of her life.

Redinger in some degree appreciates this point, although her apparent lack of mastery over her own language makes it difficult to determine the limits of her awareness. When she says, for example, that the writing of *The Mill on the Floss* "was to toss [Eliot] into the ruthless current of the creative process almost as fatally as Maggie and Tom were to be swept down the flood-swollen river," how are we to interpret that word *fatally*? Why and how is creativity destructive? Redinger continues, in the same paragraph, to describe the novelist's memory plunging "downward in its relentless search for origins," thus setting "in motion the tantalizing dialectic of artistic creation—the need to find, to defend, but also to disguise the house of self that is buried under layers of time and feeling." One gets the general idea, but any detailed effort to untangle this terminology yields only frustration. Not only verbal infelicities but imprecision mar the style and obscure the substance of narrative and interpretation. Struggling to grasp, say, the sense in which the dialectic of creation is more "tantalizing" than other dialectics—and what *tantalizing* means, and who is supposed to be tantalized—the reader loses track of the argument. He learns to distrust the biographer: her language, her relentless interpretation, her ambiguous relation to her subject. The story she tells seems finally untrue—too determined, too reductive, despite the insights and the lavish factuality it provides along the way.

R. W. B. Lewis avoids the simplifying sentimentality of the Brontë biography and the insistent shaping of the Eliot one by remaining as much

as possible in the background of his account of Edith Wharton. The book's straightforward title, in contrast to those of the other biographies, suggests its more matter-of-fact and objective approach. A triumph of meticulous and imaginative research, it offers the detailed data of individual experience in an economically-rendered but vividly-evoked series of social contexts. The sequence of photographs at the center sketches a pattern which the prose narrative richly supports—a pattern including a five-year-old waif with mournful eyes, elaborately dressed in improbable layers of 1860's clothing, a young woman hiding her eyes with two dogs on her shoulders, an older woman who appears to disguise herself in formalities of costume, and a rather plain elderly being, wearing what looks like a house dress, anybody's mother in the 1930's. The range of dress establishes the variety of social settings Edith Wharton inhabited, the world changing unimaginably around her, the woman adapting herself with remarkable flexibility to its shifts. The range of apparent feeling—the child's intense anxiety, the grown-up's attempts at concealment, the old woman's unpretentious directness—is also substantiated by the written record, whose complexity of effect derives partly from its evocation of the intricate interchange of personal feeling, public fact.

In a sense Edith Wharton was doomed from the outset to be a public figure, not because of her literary accomplishment but because of her background. Born into a socially-prominent New York family with a distant mother, a preoccupied father, she knew from her earliest youth the ambiguous pleasure of feeling constantly on display: in parlor and dining room, at archery matches and balls. Marrying Teddy Wharton, of whom neither she (in her autobiography) nor her biographer can find much to say beyond declaring his love for small dogs, she continued a life of ritualized social routine. Her writing career began only when she was in her thirties. As she won fame and wealth, becoming ever more largely visible, she used her resources to facilitate a stylish life: beautiful homes with beautiful gardens, yacht trips, house parties, tours of Europe, lunches, teas, dinners. The divorce from Teddy (in 1913) hardly altered her style: he had long seemed an unessential adjunct. Her friendships included important literary, social, artistic figures—Henry James, of course, Bernard Berenson, Vernon Lee—and the cast of characters was ever enlarging. When the First World War violated the even tenor of her expatriate existence in Paris, she flung herself into rescue operations, demonstrating a new aspect of her public self, a gift for administrative organization, a flair for dealing imaginatively as well as efficiently with human need. Continuing to produce fiction with increasing fecundity, she used its proceeds to buy and improve two more splendid houses in France and to fill them with people. Every morning she wrote, but she did not speak of her writing to her house guests. From start to finish, her life was full—increasingly full—of people, display, stimulation, even excitement of a sort. It might be thought, however, sadly devoid of intimacy, the absence of closeness symbolized by her marriage with its separate bedrooms, Teddy inquiring whether she really liked that kind of thing when she offered a philosophic paragraph for his contemplation or inviting a guest

to admire his wife's slender waist, proudly observing, "No one would ever guess that she had written a line of poetry in her life."

Lewis has uncovered the details of what was probably Wharton's single intimate sexual relationship, her love affair at the age of forty-six with Morton Fullerton, and he reveals the dimensions of a more inclusive need for intimacy. Although he does not locate the drama of Wharton's life in the tension between her desire for closeness and her commitment to a public style which achieves and depends upon distance, the data he provides encourage the reader to perceive the centrality of precisely such a conflict. "I can imagine no happiness in human intercourse," she wrote Berenson, "except when a *very* few are gathered together." Lewis speaks of "her remarkable capacity for warm and enduring friendship," although the sheer number of her relationships might seem to preclude the possibility of closeness. Yet if some of her capacity for love went into her writing, and some directed itself toward gardening and interior decoration ("I feel as if I were going to get married—to the right man at last!" she wrote, buying a house), her own comments, particularly about the loss of close associates, indicate the intensity of at least a few friendships. Typically they involved men rather than women; they focused much of the writer's extraordinary energy of personality.

Lewis's eye for the illuminating detail (comparable to the "illuminating incident" which Edith Wharton sought for her fiction) makes that energy vivid to us. It emerges particularly through the novelist's quoted passionate utterances: on war ("It is one of the most detestable things about war that everything connected with it, except the death and ruin that result, is such a heightening of life") on women's social situation ("Take your own life, every one of you"—i.e., take your life in your own hands), on her own need to *see* through her reading, on the proclivity of Lady Sybil Lubbock for marrying Edith Wharton's close friends, one after another ("*This thing has got to stop*"). In details of language and of action, the woman comes to life, wittier, funnier, braver, smarter, more pathetic, altogether more complicated than one might guess from her fiction alone. The biography through which she emerges—careful, modest, exhaustive, skillful as it is—inspires admiration for the mind that made it as well as the mind it evokes. Yet this book too seems finally disappointing as a record of a life, neither claiming nor achieving as much as it should.

Lewis's interpretive skill does not equal his expertise as researcher, summarizer, lucid narrator. He understands much of Edith Wharton's life as a search for identity, "as a human being and a writer," each new stage in her literary development involving the consolidation of a version of herself. Although this view is suggestive about the young woman's early experience, it can only imperfectly contain even her youthful ambivalent struggles against rigid social assumptions. The complexities of Wharton's inner and outer life demand more penetrating analysis. Lewis manifests uneasiness about psychological interpretation: he notes his subject's interest in enclosures, for example, but backs away rapidly from thinking about it, in order to avoid "wandering into far psychological fields, possibly fascinating but increasingly remote from the human reality." On

the other hand, speculating about the girl's self-described "choking agony of terror," her adolescent attacks of apprehension, he ventures, "Yet who was waiting, ominously, inside the house . . . but her own mother?" The suggestion, lacking any context of psychological analysis, is singularly unpersuasive. Reaching Wharton's fragmentary fiction of incest, printed at the very end of the book, one can hardly avoid realizing how utterly the biographer has failed to account for it. Wharton herself wandered "into far psychological fields"; the anomalies of her psychic career cry out for imaginative interpretation. Failing to provide it, Lewis leaves his reader weltering in a mass of facts, particularly as he reports the novelist's expatriate years, full of people, houses, tours, but difficult to perceive in any meaningful shape.

Meaningful shape, of course, is what we yearn for: in art, which increasingly fails to provide it; in our own lives; in our perceptions of the lives of others. Lives of great men once reminded us we could make our lives . . . *telling*, if not sublime. Now, our faith in sublimity much diminished, we yet read biographies eagerly, seeking not so much models of greatness as—perhaps—a sense of the possibility of achieving meaningful form in experience. "Nothing is too little for so little a creature as man," Dr. Johnson told Boswell, urging him to keep a journal. The delight of seeing in other lives the littleness we know in our own is part of the special pleasure of biography. No detail can be too small to capture our attention. Lewis, knowing this, provides such satisfactions. But, telling everything, he yet does not tell enough; he offers narrative without sufficient *story*. He has reported the details of Edith Wharton's experience without assuming imaginative possession of her life.

Too much story—Redinger's failing; too simple a story—Peters's problem; too little story. How difficult to write biography! Partly because the demands of the genre have received less critical attention than those of novel or drama, we vaguely expect almost everything of this one form of writing. And our involvement is peculiarly personal. We want biography to ignite the imagination, stimulate perception and understanding of life's possibilities; if the biographer rigidly controls the interpretation of the material, we angrily feel deprived of legitimate fulfillment. If the biographer's explanations reduce a human being to the illustration of a thesis, we feel outraged: after all, truth, we know, is rarely simple. But if we are given a chaos of unorganized experience, we feel that the reporter has not done his work of converting life to art. Existing in the vague borderland between factuality and fiction—reporting the actual, but seeking that form which belongs essentially to art—biography depends on imagination, speaks to imagination, yet forms itself out of actualities. Its genius is, finally, like that of the fulfilled life, the discovery and projection of the interchange, even the identity, of the imaginatively apprehended and the real.

MARVIN MUDRICK

Agèd Eagles and Dirty Old Men

ASIDE FROM HIS NUMEROUS WIVES and mistresses and at least one of his children,¹ very few people have a kind word for Bertrand Russell. Most of his illustrious contemporaries didn't and nowadays the reviewers don't. Certainly he's not only a genius but here or there and now and then everything they say he is, "complacent," "dogmatic," "wilful," "arbitrary," a flagrantly dissociated sensibility, "dry and passionate," doctrinaire and insinuating, stony pedant and unctuous sensualist (Gradgrind-cum-Pecksniff), an intellectual trifter and (in Santayana's *mot*) "a many-sided fanatic," a politician and what's more (according to Wyndham Lewis) "a born entertainer"—in short, a sitting duck for agèd eagles:

. . . Priapus in the shrubbery
Gaping at the lady in the swing. . . .
He laughed like an irresponsible foetus.
His laughter was submarine and profound
Like the old man of the sea's
Hidden under coral islands
Where worried bodies of drowned men drift down in the
green silence. . . .

In 1914, already the author of "Prufrock," Eliot had attended Russell's seminar at Harvard. Within the year, his doctoral studies in Germany cut short by the war, he arrived in London, encountered Russell again, courted and married an English girl, and tossed off the hissing squib against Mr. Apollinax—"I heard the beat of centaur's hoofs over the hard turf/As his dry and passionate talk devoured the afternoon"—that for all its skepticism didn't deter him from turning his wife and himself over to its target for guidance, solace, and salvation. Russell couldn't have been more solicitous (he probably ought to have been much less), he lent them his flat and gave them money, he was confidant to both of them against each other, on one occasion at Eliot's urging he took Mrs. Eliot away on vacation to a seaside resort (though their relationship, uniquely for Russell, appears to have been platonic), and as late as 1925 the author of *The Waste Land* and editor of *The Criterion* could write an eager and pathetic letter recalling and renewing his dependence on the irresponsible foetus:

If you are still in London I should very much like to see you.

My times and places are very restricted, but it is unnecessary to mention them unless I hear from you.

¹ THE LIFE OF BERTRAND RUSSELL, by *Ronald W. Clark*. Knopf. \$17.50. THE TAMARISK TREE, by *Dora Russell*. Putnam. \$9.95. MY FATHER BERTRAND RUSSELL, by *Katharine Tait*. Harcourt Brace Jovanovich. \$8.95.

I want words from you which only you can give. But if you have now ceased to care at all about either of us, just write on a slip "I do not care to see you" or "I do not care to see either of you"—and I will understand.

In case of that, I will tell you now that everything has turned out as you predicted 10 years ago. You are a great psychologist.

As Eliot discovered, it was easy to be publicly skeptical about Russell but hard to keep from being privately charmed out of one's very pinfeathers by his interest and concern, his talent for persuasion, his wit and sense of fun, his companionableness,² his generosity with his time and money, the intensity of his need to be helpful.

Summarizing the friendship with Eliot, Clark waxes ironic at Russell's facility for falling in and out of "love" with bright young men:

Their friendship gathered pace and was soon careering along the path that friendship with Russell often followed. A few years previously it was Wittgenstein who had been the disciple and Russell who described how he loved him. He continued to do so until, a decade later, the disciple struck out on his own and they agreed to differ. Relationship with Lawrence had followed a similar course. "I love him more and more and I wouldn't dream of discouraging his socialist revolution," he had declared before falling out with him on the means of social reconstruction. Now came Eliot and [Lady] Ottoline [Morrell] once again was reading, "I loved him like a son."

Maybe "love" isn't the right word. Nevertheless, it was with every evidence of attachment and good will that Russell did what he did for Eliot, who could still be full of trust after ten years, still respectful after thirty-five years to "one of the few living authors who can write English prose," and after fifty years still susceptible to "grateful and affectionate memories" of the old centaur with whom, "as you may know, I disagree . . . on most subjects, but I thought that you put your beliefs over in a most dignified and even persuasive way" (Eliot was seventy-six and Russell ninety-two!). As for Wittgenstein, nobody could have been more personally kind and more professionally useful over many years than Russell toward this archetype of the solitary, original, helplessly unworldly, bristling, unbudgeable mind: Clark's sneer at Russell's "love" for Wittgenstein is particularly unwarranted because the feeling despite changes of temperature sustained itself into old age, it never failed to respond at once and generously through a range of crises and difficulties, and it was quite unimpaired by Russell's modest and cheerful conviction—as early as the

² A friend of his, the soldier and explorer Francis Younghusband, who made the Atlantic crossing with him, remarked that "he did not carry his argumentative habit on to an Atlantic steamer. On board ship he was a . . . delightful companion. We had a small table to ourselves at meals; and we paced the decks together all day long; and there was no end to the subjects which interested him."

time when Wittgenstein was his pupil—that the pupil was far beyond the master and would go forward to do the work in the philosophy of logic which was beyond the master's reach. The only one of Clark's trio against whom Russell recoiled with violence, in fact with an extremely uncharacteristic lifelong hatred, was Lawrence: but Lawrence had just exploded into his most trying phase of irritable vaticination, and even a less inveterate rationalist than Russell might have been repelled by Lawrence's Delphic snottiness at the time. Anyhow, during three years (1911-1914) to have bound to oneself with hoops of love or friendship or mere mutual admiration three such various young men as Wittgenstein, Lawrence, and Eliot isn't bad for a born entertainer.

Besides, the term suits Russell less neatly than it suits one of his contemporaries: Shaw, with whom he was often associated in pacifist and libertarian agitation during the first decades of the century, and who like Russell was liable to mistake publicity and hurly-burly for influence. Wyndham Lewis may have carelessly lumped them together as they were lumped together by a generation of British feminists and political reformers, for whom they made up two-thirds of the secular Trinity, so the second Mrs. Russell reminds us in her autobiography—

... Shaw, Wells and Russell were the three great emancipators for my generation from Victorian orthodoxies, liberating thought from superstition and prejudice, the individual from the tyranny of the family system, woman from her traditional servitude, the worker from his chains. . . .

Also, Shaw and Russell both lived long enough to stop being funny and wither into superannuated scarecrows hurling low-voltage thunderbolts at the enormities of a world they had never made. This last period of Russell's life—the decade of the 'sixties—is what Solzhenitsyn must have been concentrating on when, in a recent BBC-TV interview (as reported in *The New Yorker* of March 15, 1976; and there are a couple of relevant footnotes in *Gulag Two*), he denounced Russell for the pusillanimity of the "better-red-than-dead" slogan of the anti-nuclear demonstrations. But Russell was almost the only Western liberal intellectual who from the outbreak of the Russian Revolution weighed its facts against its promises. His account of the Soviet reality, which he observed during a visit in 1920, isn't incompatible with *The Gulag Archipelago* as he describes "the sense of utter horror which overwhelmed me while I was there. Cruelty, poverty, suspicion, persecution formed the very air we breathed. . . . I felt that everything that I valued in human life was being destroyed in the interests of a glib and narrow philosophy, and that in the process untold misery was being inflicted upon many millions of people."³ (Compare Shaw's

³ Clark publishes for the first time Russell's account in his Russian Journal of his interview with Lenin. Solzhenitsyn would be interested. "Nothing in his manner or bearing suggests the man who has power. He looks at his visitor very close, & screws up one eye. He laughs a great deal; at first his laugh seems merely friendly & jolly, but gradually, one

unrestrained public flirtation with Stalin and his praise of the purges; anything for a laugh.) Russell never changed his mind about the Soviet tyranny, which as late as the last years of World War II he called "even worse than Hitler's"; indeed, as late as 1950, the slogan he favored was "better dead than red," when he very nearly advocated a preventive nuclear war against Russia: "The next war, if it comes, will be the greatest disaster that will have befallen the human race up to that moment. I can think of only one greater disaster: the extension of the Kremlin's power over the whole world." It took another decade or more—at ninety he remained an implacable public man who still felt the need to be useful to the world—before he let himself be persuaded by the Cuban missile confrontation and Vietnam, as well as by the opinionated and presumptuous young man who had moved in as his last disciple (an American in the mold of Rubin, Hoffman, and company), that the Americans were even worse than the Russians; but his record of the previous forty years on the Soviet issue oughtn't to be brushed aside.

Moreover, he was personally committed to social issues as the all-licensed jester Shaw never was. Russell didn't content himself with producing books and pamphlets and hortatory newspaper articles, or even with conducting energetic campaigns for Parliament: e.g. he had as was to be expected strong views on education, but also, like Tolstoy before him, when the opportunity came he insisted on putting his time and money where his mouth was. In their books his wife and his daughter have much to say about the Beacon Hill School, in which they were respectively co-director and student. It was founded in 1927, and run on principles that today sound as reasonable and practicable as in 1927 they must have sounded dangerous and outlandish. He gave it a good try. For five years whatever money of his he hadn't managed to hand out already in public and private benefactions, as well as whatever he earned from lecturing and royalties, went to the school, which swallowed it all and accumulated a large deficit; except for his financially essential lecture tours he devoted his time to directing and teaching at the school, and on the evidence he was patient, conscientious, enthusiastic, affectionate, and effective in both capacities; his participation ended only when his second marriage ended.

All his life he loved to be with children, not only in classroom situations. His youngest son, Conrad, recalled hill-climbing with him in Wales: "I remember him reaching the top of Cnicht when he was 77 and I was 11 and our climbing powers were approximately equal, and I remember him at 95, swinging over the steps to the balcony for the sheer delight of the view of Snowdon in the afternoon sun." According to his daughter,

He was a perfect grandfather. He gave the children wonderful pre-

finds it grim. He is dictatorial, calm, incapable of fear, devoid of self-seeking, an embodied theory. The materialist conception of history is his life-blood. He resembles a professor in his desire to have the theory understood & in his fury with those who misunderstand or disagree; also in his love of expounding. . . ."

sents and grandfatherly bits of money, and talked to them intelligently about things that interested them, so that they soon ceased to be shy. And he told them all his best stories, the ones I had loved most as a child. I have a vivid memory of him sitting by the fire, ancient and wrinkled and strange, perhaps even a little frightening, telling them about Mysie with the golden leg.

"There was once an heiress," he began, "a very rich young woman, who lost a leg in an accident. She was far too grand for a mere wooden leg, so they got her one made of gold. In due course, she married a handsome villain who cared only for her money. After he had spent all she had, he murdered her at night and ran off with the golden leg. Soon after, she came haunting him by night, as ghastly as ghosts usually are."

Here he would lean forward in his chair, open his eyes wide and declaim, in a sepulchral Scots voice:

"Mysie, Mysie, whaur's yer beautiful blue e'en?"

"Mould'ring in the grave."

"Mysie, Mysie, whaur's yer beautiful rosy cheeks?"

"Mould'ring in the grave."

"Mysie, Mysie, whaur's yer beautiful gowden hair?"

"Mould'ring in the grave."

"Mysie, Mysie, whaur's yer beautiful gowden leg?"

"You have it, you thief!"—shouting suddenly, to make small listeners jump out of their skins.

Some of Mrs. Tait's book reads like a half-hearted attempt at a debunking: she says the school was bad for her because, after an idyllic childhood with two loving parents, once the school opened they decided to treat her without the slightest appearance of favoritism, and so she lost both mother and father in the mentors they necessarily became; furthermore, irrespective of the problems brought by the school, Russell's standard was usually too high for his children, and they suffered in unspeakable silence for not measuring up to it. Now doubtless Russell was naïve to think that everything could be talked out, and that a sensible education would prevent or cure the defects and miseries of children; but mainly what Mrs. Tait's touching book proves is that growing up is hard for anybody and growing up with a dazzling exemplar on the premises may be hardest of all. Then she concludes with a tribute that rings true:

It was a long time before I thought of writing about him. I will tell the world what a great father he was, I said to myself, how wise and witty and kind, how much fun we always had. They mustn't think he was always a cold and rational philosopher. So I thought, and so I began to write, but it has not come out that way. The "but"s and complaints seized my pen and forced it to record them. "He loved truth, you know," they urged. "You cannot honor him with a lying memoir. You must set down all that was wrong, all that was difficult and disappoint-

ing, and then you can say: 'He was the most fascinating man I have ever known, the only man I ever loved, the greatest man I shall ever meet, the wittiest, the gayest, the most charming. It was a privilege to know him, and I thank God he was my father.'"

(This daughter of the world's champion atheist had turned to religion early and married a man who soon after quit his job to study for the ministry and be ordained, whereupon they went off to Africa together as missionaries—characters in an Eliot play! "The care that God provided included considerable financial assistance from my father, which prompted me to write to him that I thought God must be amused by the irony of the situation. He wrote back to say that he didn't know about God, but certainly the officials of the Bank of England, whose permission he needed to send us money, had been very much amused.")

Women adored him, no matter how badly things worked out. His second wife, more doctrinaire than the Pope, made the error of taking Russell's views on free love so literally that, having informed him of her project, she had a child by another man; what followed was not only divorce but bitter and protracted wrangling over custody of the two children she had had by Russell; yet her book questions nothing about him except his decision to leave her: "I loved Bertie with adoration and almost worship. He was lover, father-figure, teacher, a companion never at a loss for a witty rejoinder or a provoking bit of nonsense. . . . The joy of living side by side with Bertie was that he was never superior, he was always such fun. . . ."⁴

He married four times, had two mistresses with whom his relations were probably closer and more serious than with any of his wives, and innumerable casual affairs—for example with a young faculty wife (he was old enough to be her grandfather) when he returned to Cambridge in 1946: "although she was still in her twenties and he in his seventies, she could later speak of 'the peculiarly intense & complete nature of our very passionate feelings'" which continued off and on so to speak for years. Nobody could have predicted such a future from his first marriage, which was conventionally happy for seven years, suicidally miserable (and celibate) for the next nine, till he absconded abruptly in 1910 (his first wife loved him all her long life, and died a half-century later still hoping he would come back to her): Russell was thirty-eight, he had just completed

⁴ In his Autobiography Russell remarks that he "tried to preserve that respect for my wife's liberty which I thought that my creed enjoined . . . [but] my capacity for forgiveness . . . was not equal to the demands I was making on it." The prose is no fun at all, uncandid (he doesn't mention that there was already another woman on the scene), and typical. One reason for the prevailing chilliness toward Russell may be that readers have been deriving their impressions of him from the Autobiography, which is dry, scrappy, often evasive and misleading especially about the women in his life, written in a sniffy and remote donnish style, and consistently low-spirited: Clark notes that the first draft was done when Russell was "in one of his deep periodic troughs, at low ebb both personally and professionally." For readers who know Russell only through his Autobiography, the biography will—or at least should—be a revelation.

with Whitehead, after a decade's terrible labor, his major philosophical work, *Principia Mathematica*; the only woman with whom he had ever had sexual relations was his wife, and not with her for the past nine years. In 1909 he met Lady Ottoline Morrell and in 1911 the dam broke: she became his mistress and till her death in 1938, his most trusted confidante. In 1916 he met "Colette" (Lady Constance Malleeson), the love of his life (he was old enough to be her father),⁵ an actress, daughter of an Earl, an intelligent, brave, beautiful woman who loved him selflessly and passionately—it's true, really!—till his death fifty-three years later:

In his autobiography, Russell gives the impression that this was an *affaire* which ended when he abandoned Colette after five years; when, as she herself put it, she "woke up one fine morning in 1921 to find life finished." At its best, this is an urbane example of his ability to make the best [?] of his own story. The truth is very different. In the late 1920s, he renewed the relationship in a number of idyllic meetings in Somerset and Cornwall. More than a decade on, and after an ecstatic holiday together in Sweden, Russell had again become convinced, as he told her, that they "should never have parted." Yet the story was still the same, and the two persistent lovers parted for the third time, Russell perhaps fearing that marriage would ruin it all. But nearly twenty years later, in his nineties, he was still to be filled with love and affection at the regular arrival of Colette's red roses every birthday. And on the eve of Christmas 1968, she could still write to him, "Nothing on this earth could have given me greater delight than getting your dear letter of the 16th this very day. My thoughts are constantly with you. I send you all the most devoted love always and for ever."

He was seventy-six when they had their "ecstatic holiday" reunion in Sweden: "Colette had decked out his room with lilies-of-the-valley, violas and golden cowslips. He was wearing on his watch-chain the small gold coin she had given him after the Lulworth reunion of 1919. She was wearing the dress, trimmed with his mother's lace, which she had made for his return from China in 1921. Did his wife know, she asked, that she was not only in the same city, but in the same hotel and with a bedroom on the same floor? Russell, with a lifetime's experience of turning dangerous corners, was unperturbed. 'I will make little of it,' he replied."

The following year she stayed with him in his cottage in Wales (his wife was away), and when he left on a trip to the Continent for more honors she wrote him the next morning so that he would have a letter waiting in Aix:

But isn't it just another fleck of the irony which has always dogged our

⁵ When in 1918 he was in prison for seditious pacifism, she would go to bed early the night before the weekly visit she was allowed "anointed with Madame Helena Rubinstein's face cream, so's to look presentable for you tomorrow; if not the Lord's Anointed, anyway the Hon. Bertrand's." She was twenty-two.

steps that what would have saved a number of shipwrecks in 1920 is out of place—or seems so—in 1949.

I'll creep into your big bed tonight, to have the ghost of that kind of closeness as well as "the coldness of interstellar spaces." I expect that both will live on always in me, independent of everything.

Soon after, they met for the last time: "He knew that she was returning to Sweden and asked when she would be coming back. 'Never,' she replied—'unless you ask me.' He appeared astonished, repeating the one word, 'Never.' " But he lived another twenty years and never asked her. The swine.

HAYDEN CARRUTH

How

SUPPOSE FOR A MOMENT, if you will, the insupposable, viz. that no white people or other foreigners had ever intruded on the native civilizations of America. What would have happened? We are told that the evolutionary or progressive concepts of history which dominated European thought from Plato to Martin Luther to Herbert Spencer are exactly what the Indians were least able and willing to absorb when in fact the great conflict came between their cultures and those of the transplanted Europeans. So perhaps nothing would have happened. Perhaps the Indians would simply have continued more or less as they were, having struck a balance in their relationships to nature, to one another, and to their own ideas and perceptions. On the other hand the one constant if immeasurable factor in human affairs does seem to be change, and change does seem to proceed in spells roughly characterizable as either refinements or debasements of the fundamental systems of belief which motivate the particular changing civilizations. Assuming, then, as we apparently may safely do on the basis of what we know about Indian civilizations in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, that the Indians were at the beginning, or a little past the beginning, of a spell of refinement, what might we see in looking upon the eventuality of their historical processes?

What I see is a condition of life that would have made the great utopian philosophers of the nineteenth century blink their eyes in astonishment and delight, and that makes me blink my eyes with tears. Think of it: a society without economic stratification, in which property does not exist, either private or corporate or, at least conceptually, social; a society animated entirely by spiritual and esthetic knowledge, neither a Puritan theocracy nor a hierarchical Catholic *civitas dei*, but a community of the imagination, so to speak, a functionally mutual perception of collective mind and will as the spiritual manifestation of the natural world; a society without institutions, without specializations, in which education is a process of the entire social organism, carried on through refined sequences of apprenticeships; a society whose technological advancement is based not on mechanics but on, say, architecture, like the Roman; a society . . . but I am no political scientist, I cannot even imagine all the possibilities. I am sure some of them would be evil; Indians are no more capable of utopia than the rest of us. But still, what strikes me now, and what I think is striking many others as well, though I have read no more than a little of the immense new wave of literature on the "Indian question," is the way in which the best parts of Indian civilization three centuries ago seem to have prefigured the dreams of the great European reformers, the way in which our utopian fabrications may be extrapolated from the basic cultural paradigms of the Indians, and the way, moreover, in which this can

be done with the utmost simplicity, as the Indians would have done it, i.e., by passing over the entire economic and political apparatus of European society. And that apparatus was erected on the concept of property.

Incidentally I am not—I insist on this—merely restating the theme of the “noble savage,” but rather I am attempting a proposition in comparative anthropology; not at all original with me, of course, but it needs as much emphasis and publicity as we can give it.

One book of the new wave that I have read, because it was assigned to me for this review, is *The Harrowing of Eden*, by J. E. Chamberlin, who is a Canadian professor and advisor to the government in Ottawa on policies related to native peoples.¹ I was pleased to see that Chamberlin begins on the first page with just this concept of property as the distinguishing element in the confrontation between Indian and European cultures. He goes on to show how, in both Canada and the United States, the effort to force assimilation upon Indians has, at various times and often indirectly, proceeded in terms of persuading them to acknowledge individual title in property, thus trapping them into the whole civil structure, political, economic, and social, based on property. Of course the effort failed, especially in the west and north where native populations remain the least indoctrinated. Chamberlin writes: “The United States administration of its Indians has always been conditioned by the theoretical premise that a single, complete and final solution could be found for the problem which they present; and that this solution would be continuous with the social, economic and political structures which define the Union and which contain its ideological intentions.” That’s it in a nutshell. Elsewhere he continues: “Not only were the Indians at times a threat because of their intermittently warlike moods, but their very way of life—generally nomadic, in large measure communal, engagingly ceremonial, almost without exception insensitive to the European notions of the political and economic importance of property, and entirely lacking in the conventional non-native respect for habits of industry and thrift—constituted a very serious danger to the basic civil and religious, as well as the narrowly social and economic, stabilities which the European newcomers were attempting to establish or sustain. . . . These values [the stabilities, etc.] were inseparably bound up with the notion that property is defined not only by its use *but also and more materially by its ownership*, and that such a definition is both a necessary and a sufficient condition for civilized human settlements [my italics].” But of course it was precisely this idea of ownership that seemed outrageous and incomprehensible to the Indians.

That is the crux of Chamberlin’s view, which he elaborates through a discussion of the entire confrontation between Europeans and Indians from the time of Columbus to the present day. Property is fundamental to western consciousness and has been since the Reformation if not from long before. But that makes it neither right nor inevitable, as the Indian

¹ THE HARROWING OF EDEN: WHITE ATTITUDES TOWARD NATIVE AMERICANS, by J. E. Chamberlin. Seabury Press. \$8.95.

(and other) civilizations amply prove, and until we can acknowledge that the Indian view is just as good as ours, and maybe better, we will never find a way to a peaceful relationship between our races.

With all this I concur warmly. Yet I have not, I'm sorry to say, found my reading of Chamberlin's book a satisfactory experience. I have two reasons. First, the book skips around so from era to era, country to country, incident to incident, that I have been unable to find any system of organization in it at all, and this lack of system has left me often enough in a state of confusion leading to boredom. Nor have I been helped by the writing, which is turgid and imprecise, as my two quotations indicate. It's a misfortune. The matter of Chamberlin's book deserves a more serviceable manner.

But my second reason is more important, though it reflects no discredit on Chamberlin, or at least no more than it does on all of us. His book is in effect an explanation of European behavior in America. It tells us not only why our ancestors did what they did but what they were thinking when they did it: their rationale, their justification. In this respect, of course, the book is a companion piece to hundreds of others, and in its generally critical, radical viewpoint it especially complements other studies of recent years; for instance, Elémire Zolla's *The Writer and the Shaman*, which came out a couple of years ago with the idea of Progress, the product of European enlightenment, as the key to understanding white treatment of Indians. There are as many such explanations as there are disciplines or viewpoints within disciplines, and all of them are probably necessary, and almost all probably true—relatively speaking. But for my part I want no more explanations. An explanation may not be an out-and-out defense, though many have been, but it inevitably does take on the nature of an apology in the older sense: an *apologia*. I say inevitably, and I think this is exactly the case. Apology is built into explanation. Every explaining becomes an explaining away. I cannot doubt for a moment the sincerity of Chamberlin's many warm expressions of concern for the welfare of native peoples. Yet his book still sounds like an apology, and the time for apology is past.

Ten years ago in the southwest I met an Indian trader, as scruffy a one as the rest of his type, who had been living among Indians for years and had taken the trouble, very great trouble, to learn four native languages well enough to translate into English the native texts of several important Indian treaties, thus to show that the Indians were quite justified in their interpretations of what they had signed, though their interpretations often significantly varied, and still do, from those of federal authorities in Washington. The native and English texts of the same treaty simply do not agree, my trader told me, if only because the original official translators were unable to find accurate cognates in such dissimilar languages, though he himself was clear in his own mind that more than incompetent translation was to blame for the disagreements. He showed me a bundle of frayed, faded, scarcely literate manuscript and asked me to help him put it in good form and find a publisher. To my shame, I told him I didn't have

time, which was perfectly true. For all I know he is wandering the desert yet, with that bundle of manuscript stowed in the back of his jeep.

Would the manuscript help? Perhaps not. For that matter someone else may already have done the job, and the treaties themselves may no longer have the importance they once had. What is important is the way those treaties symbolize our contretemps, this total cultural impasse. Misunderstanding and incomprehensibility. One treaty in two languages equals two completely different views of reality. But what is a nation if not a culture, and what are the Indians if not a nation, or rather several nations? We called them that once, and then signed the treaties with them—and then did everything we could to destroy their nationhood. We failed. Certainly the time has come to call them nations again, in the fullest sense, because that is what they are, and to acknowledge that our long obsessive dream of assimilation is both a practical folly and a moral outrage.

Recently the Innu nation of the far north sent its leaders to Ottawa to present to the Canadian government, not a claim, but an offer; namely, to share their land with Canada. Why should they claim it? They are the only ones who live there, the only ones who have ever lived there. Granted, a few foreigners intruded for military purposes twenty-odd years ago, and lately a few more have discovered a terrible urge to drill for oil and lay pipelines, there where the Innuits have hunted and fished for centuries; but clearly these foreigners are intruders, not residents. (The word *Innu* means “the people.”) The Innuits’ offer is obviously, perhaps calculatedly, generous, just as the considerations they ask in return are obviously, and again perhaps calculatedly, reasonable and modest. It is a remarkable case. I cannot recall that any other native nation has presented itself to the white settlers with quite this degree of cultural, even civil, clarity and cohesiveness; certainly not in recent times. What will Prime Minister Trudeau and his advisers do? I don’t see how they can conform to the basic impetus of European settlement without dashing the Innuits’ offer to the ground, no doubt dashing a few Innuits with it. On the other hand I don’t see how they can conform to the simple, universally admitted precepts of morality without meeting the Innuits’ offer on exactly the terms in which it has been made. As I say, a remarkable and remarkably interesting case. I recommend that everyone pay close attention, and do so conspicuously, to Mr. Trudeau’s response. Whatever it is, it must be clear. It must not be permitted to slip away in pettifoggery.

RICHARD PEEVEAR

Poetry and Worldlessness

PASTERNAK MADE A RATHER surprising pronouncement in a speech to the 1936 plenum of the Soviet Writers' Union. "Here," he said, "some of you with great conviction distinguished good verses from bad as if they were correctly or incorrectly turned machine parts . . . and I became convinced once again that, generally speaking, verses, good and bad, do not exist, but that there are only good and bad poets, that is, whole systems of thought which are either productive or which spin in the void." That is a rough distinction. Pasternak had listened to a lot of nonsense at the meeting and was clearly annoyed. But I think that he was also right.

The question of a general tendency or system of thought becomes unavoidable, in any case, when one is faced with a number of poets who write the same kind of poetry, as is true of several who have published new books recently. In the past, this particular kind of poetry might simply have been called academic. But academic verse-writing has become a much broader field of activity than it was ten or fifteen years ago, and new lower limits have been set for what is acceptable as verse. (Both developments are amply attested to in *The American Poetry Anthology*, edited by Daniel Halpern,¹ which, because of the complex and non-poetic nature of the issues it raises, I will not attempt to talk about here.) The writers I am referring to have higher standards of craftsmanship and of intelligence, and the limitations of their work, which are real and disturbing, are of a different order—due, I think, to the nature of the genre itself. For this review I've chosen five books in particular which show both the apparent diversity and the real uniformity of the genre—books by John Hollander, Howard Moss, Robert Pinsky, Peter Porter, and Christopher Middleton.²

With the exception of Robert Pinsky (this is his first book), these poets have all published widely and have been widely praised, and it may be just as well to talk more generally about their work. The correct or incorrect turning of poems is not the question anyway, because they are all skilled writers. They are even all skilled in the same way. Take, for example, these five passages:

Behind the hoardings of ramshackle words:
Mother Golden in the cereal field,

¹ Avon/Equinox Books. \$5.95.

² TALES TOLD OF THE FATHERS, by *John Hollander*. Atheneum. \$7.95. BURIED CITY, by *Howard Moss*. Atheneum. \$6.95. SADNESS AND HAPPINESS, by *Robert Pinsky*. Princeton University. \$7.50 cloth; \$2.95 paper. LIVING IN A CALM COUNTRY, by *Peter Porter*. Oxford University. \$4.00. THE LONELY SUPPERS OF W. V. BALLOON, by *Christopher Middleton*. David Godine. \$7.95.

Burnishing the grain and dross, breathing rough
 Aspirations amongst dancing straws;
 A Deus in the graciousness of day,
 Drunk with skyeiness. . . .

Hollander, "The Hidden Ones"

The meanest melon slice of sunlight rims
 An olive velvet unmade daybed, dims
 Out of its own accord along the sides
 Of a kitchen bathtub, hesitates, and then
 Shivers for a second, and goes down the drain.

Moss, "Cold Water Flats"

. . . And Alcibiades, balling Lady Luck
 Until she dried him up. When people say

"How was your summer?" who is there alive
 Who wouldn't like to change sides, go to Sparta
 Like Alcibiades, cut your hair, live clean. . . .

Pinsky, "Discretions of Alcibiades"

The mat, woven of rushes, also supports
 the lines of feet mounting past the ankles
 into calves that curve up into little pits
 of light back of the knees.

Above the bowl
 a mirror on a string, and where the frame
 swooshes down to complete another oval,
 a smudge of hair, a flit of shoulder show.

Middleton, "Le nu provençal"

Night and silence have always been indoors,
 A provincial pinchbeck still extraordinary
 Among the duodecimo principalities
 And me the hidalgo of all self-esteem.

Porter, "Night Crossing"

The ear detects the interchangeability of phrasings, rhythms, tone—the rhetoric of the style. The intellect makes out the uniformity of operation in the making of the verse, that is, of the mental activity behind it. The two go together. But, more important, they pre-exist their use in any particular poem. The essence of this kind of verse is in fact the pre-existence of its manner, which gives it a secondary quality. The characteristics of the manner are a preciousness in description and in word-sense; an over-working of the surface, which tends to make it opaque, or all that one sees in the poem; a certain way of voicing the language—with a preponderance of

frontal sounds and a patter of extra syllables in the line; rarely with a slow cadence, a strong stress, a vowel sounded in the chest rather than behind the teeth—which gives it a flippant quality even when it means to be serious.

With these characteristics goes a tendency to formality, that is, not to the construction of form but to the application of certain regular patterns to the lines. Blank verse is one such arrangement, another is the division of unrhymed lines of equal length into triads—a pattern used by Hollander, Pinsky, Porter, and Middleton. How this practice differs from the constructing of form is suggested by Mandelstam in his essay on Dante. After quoting a line from the *Inferno* (XXXII, 4), “Io premerei di mio concetto il suco” (“I would squeeze the juice out of my conception”), he adds: “. . . form is conceived of by [Dante] as something wrung out, not as something that envelops. Thus, strange as it may be, form is pressed out of content—the conception—which, as it were, envelops the form. . . .” Poetry that achieves constructed form may also be formally patterned, as Dante’s is. Formality becomes mere formalizing when it is used to give the impression of form to material that has no inner relationship, that has not felt the pressure of a poetic impulse. Often in these poems, for example, the content, far from being a conception in Dante’s sense, is merely an adjunct to a series of formalized variations, as in Middleton’s “A Cart with Apples” which plays five times on a rearrangement of the same words; as in Moss’s “Cold Water Flats” and Hollander’s “The Shades,” in which variations on the possible meanings of the title words (cold water flats can refer to apartments, oyster beds, the blues, or wet windows; shades can be window shades, ghosts, colors) are written up in separate sections with the same number and length of lines. Such refining away of content leaves the writing on the page as the only precipitate and underscores the arbitrariness of the formal unit. At the same time, while a true poetic impulse can extend through and inform a number of poems, formalized versewriting produces a miscellaneous collection of items, or what is sometimes called *vers d’album*. In fact, the sprightliest, most engaging, and perhaps most forthright of these five books, Middleton’s *Lonely Suppers of W. V. Balloon*, is put together precisely as an album of snapshots, post cards, parts of letters, travel jottings, an article from a fashion magazine cut up and rearranged, some diary entries.

The limitations of the genre are most apparent, however, in the area Pasternak referred to specifically, in its system of thought. One would think that an inevitable diversity of personal experience would have its effect despite a sameness of manner, but that does not seem to be the case with these poets, either because their experiences are not diverse or because the manner itself contains its own outlook. In any event, the same system of thought appears in these books and the same means are used for expressing it, of which the two main examples are the verse essay and a convention made up in varying proportions of dream, fantasy, and riddling.

Hollander’s *Tales Told of the Fathers* shows the strongest preference for

riddling. One section of the book is entitled "Something about It," and begins with a short poem called "Who It Was":

Expelled naked into life,
Gathered naked out of it
(O, save for the nakedness
Were leaving like arriving!),
It gave some indications
Of being like us in this.

But many more of his poems, not riddling so openly, depend on a withholding of the subject and the breathing of an air of mystery around it. Middleton's poems are often riddling in a less purposeful way. His "Fractions for Another Telemachus" contain some people (a young man and a girl) and present some actions, and evidently have to do with a notion of Viktor Shklovsky's (a note tells us) about time, but it is all abstracted into pure text. Another poem, "Luberon Story," narrates in eight of its thirty-four lines some stark events: "bullets ripped across his chest/ women slither/ screaming weeping/ down the hewn steps I'm plodding up/ men grab hoes & running/ crumple in blood"—which another note tells us embody "the persecutions of Catharists and Vaudois—13th to 16th centuries."

The stress on fantasy appears in Moss's title poem, "Buried City," which imagines Western history from the point of view of a future archaeologist (but the convention is less strict than that suggests and allows him to move in and out of various kinds of material), and in Pinsky's "Destruction of Long Branch" in which he envisions his own success in bringing the ocean in to wash away the wretched sea-side town (his birth-place). Fantasy, or fantasizing, also makes up a large portion of the title poem of Pinsky's book, "Sadness and Happiness." Most often, as in Moss's "Memories of Lower Fifth," it has some connection with nostalgia:

I loved them once, those towering hotels
On lower Fifth, where I imagined lives
Far richer than those lives turned out to be. . . .

And throughout the poems, mixed in various ways, are states of semi-consciousness, of reverie, dream, and nightmare.

There are a number of reasons why poets of this particular kind should choose this particular convention. For one thing, it allows them a large measure of arbitrariness in their writing; the mind can associate freely, and introduce the most disparate materials, for which dreaming is a kind of solvent. It supplies a wealth of subject matter where there is a paucity of worldly experience. And it is consonant with formality and an elaboration of surface, since it is answerable only to the writer's will, having no will of its own (as is not the case, for instance, when one is confronted with

another human being). But a more important reason is that the dream-fantasy convention serves as a focus for perhaps the most central theme of this poetry—illusion vs. reality, a conflict which is always resolved on the side of illusion, in a resigned acceptance of the illusoriness of existence, the insubstantiality of human character, the consequent inability to act or to love (as in Moss's "Sawdust," which brings these things together quite deliberately, and ends wondering "if pain is a substitute for love, or love"). And since pain has been mentioned, I must add that there is talk of fear, terror, and darkness in this poetry, but that these too are of the kind experienced in dreams, the kind that frighten children. Time and again we come upon the same evocation of a benighted nothingness:

Its face lay gathering
 Darkness of its own, in
 The gathering darkness,
 In the harvesting night.
 (Hollander, "Something About It")

Or as with Pinsky's rescued "Spelunker" whose friends hold him up and give him a drink

Miraculously bright and cool,
 The elixir of his dream,
 His dream which marks the pall
 Of darkness with cool stars for him.

Or with Peter Porter, the most outspoken ideologist, or apologist, of the genre, who says of a made-up character in "To Make It Real":

. . . non sequiturs of heartburn and despair
 are felt like persons in the early dark.

The poem itself is a wry but unintentional commentary on this entire corpus of resigned poetry; it is about trying to write a poem "to trap a piece of real" and the failure to do so; but the poet accommodates the failure, smiles wisely at it, and by some serious twists ("despair" and "early dark") tries to give the experience a profundity it does not have. He ends with the appropriate and by now automatic reflection:

our well-lit world goes in the World Machine,
 chaff in the jaws of God, blood in a dream.

Death also puts in its clockwork appearance in this poetry, particularly, in these books, the death of a father. People in the past are seen as in death, and the world itself as ready for death, since nothing else is happening in it. Again, it is the disarming wisdom of resignation, a

conceptual poetry that brings with it some strange reversals of human emotion. Porter's "Family Album" ends:

O sails of death
that we watched from the river, weeks of rain
when we came to our father's house,
the pictures are ready, shall we walk in?

It is all too easy, too foreseeable, and too clever. Darkness, despair, and death are handed the victory without a struggle and apparently without cost to the poet, who passes off as insight or as truth what is merely the available, conventional resolution of the poem. Reading these things one trembles, as Kierkegaard said, "at the thought of what it is to be a man."

Where did this genre come from? One answer is suggested in a poem that represents the second common convention in these books, the verse essay. Hollander's "Under Aquarius" is dedicated to W. H. Auden and addressed to him in approximately his own manner. The poet looks up at the sign of the present, Aquarius, "the tired zodiacal emblem/ Rising, penultimate now, over the nights of our years," and then turns to speak to Auden: "Back under other signs, as chattering schoolboys, we revelled/ Hopefully on the ground your way of speaking prepared. . . ." So it may be true that these particular qualities of resigned acceptance and wise despair first appeared in Auden's verse. Indeed, in speaking to Auden, and in speaking like him, Hollander writes a page that brings together all the elements of the genre as one has come to expect them, apotheosizing the poet finally as a star shining: "Up among us and our worlds turning in darkness around." And perhaps Auden was the first poet, not of lost youth certainly but of welcomed middle age, the first to settle in that "calm country" Peter Porter celebrates:

I have begun to live in a new land,
not the old land of fear
but the new one of disappointment.
(*"The Story of My Conversion"*)

But the sins of the sons should not be visited too heavily on the father.

Something must be said about the problem of alienation, if that tired word can still manage to speak. What I find most disturbing about the genre is its automatism, the readiness of all its elements to fall into place once the first directive is given. A true impulse can hardly find its way through such a network of set responses. The genre, in other words, generates its own alienation, which is another way of saying that it spins in the void. Yet as a specific of the theme of illusion vs. reality, alienation is the subject of many of these poems. The problem lies in the way the subject is treated, and it shows up with peculiar clarity in Robert Pinsky's long poem, "Essay on Psychiatrists." It is particularly right that Pinsky should have chosen the figure of the psychiatrist rather than the artist,

though he says further on that psychiatrists are "like artists . . . mere/ Experts dependent on their own wisdom. . . ." What he presents is a study not exactly of the type of poet I've been talking about, the poet of this genre, but of his cultural daimon:

Pink and a bit soft-bodied, with a somewhat jazzy
Middle-class bathing suit and sandy sideburns, to me
He looked from the back like one more professor.

Again one thinks of Auden, of his use of psychiatric notions in his verse; and of the talk of pain, fear, and darkness in these books, that "profoundity" that is precisely psychiatric and not poetic. Pinsky draws the latter comparison himself in section XIV of the essay, "Their Speech, Compared With Wisdom And Poetry." And something very interesting happens here. He sets terms like "neurotic" and "paranoid" and "anal" beside

. . . the terms
Of myth, the phrases that well up in my mind:
Two blind women and a blind little boy, running—

and says further on:

Hot in pursuit and flight,
Justice, Fortune, and Love demand the arts
Of knowing and naming

It is a moving section, but why? Because of the *old poetry* it contains, like a spring in the desert. Through this opening one can see beyond the limits of album verse something bolder, simpler, more indelible, the realm of "selfless song." But the poet is *here*, among psychiatrists, and he cannot go over *there* without giving up the poem. The dilemma throws light on the curiously self-abrogating quality of much of Pinsky's work. It also makes the conclusion inevitable.

One has been aware throughout the poem of the wry, absolving sympathy in Pinsky's portrait of the psychiatrist. That sympathy fulfills its promise in section XXI, the conclusion of the discourse:

. . . so that it seems
That "psychiatrist" is a synonym for "human being"

That closing gesture is so characteristic of the genre, and there is so much implied in it, that it is worth looking closely at. The statement itself is a non sequitur; "psychiatrist," especially as the term is expanded upon in the poem, is not a synonym for "human being." It cannot be made to include a Chinese peasant, or a Dogon tribesman, or an East European metal worker. It may well be a synonym for a certain kind of poet and for

other members of that educated, professional class whose mental habits, foibles, totemic objects, and strange self-love Pinsky so wittily comments on in the poem. The problem appears precisely in this characteristic generalizing of a particular state of mind. In a certain sense, the effects of alienation are recognized in this poetry. But its causes are not. Alienation, by the same sort of reversal that occurs in the talk about death, is embraced by the poet and projected onto the world as inherent in the human condition. That syndrome is substituted in each of these books for a recognition of the nature of alienation and a penetration into its causes, and for the next possible step, which would be an attempt to present those causes in such a way that they might be overcome. But that would involve a transformation of the genre, the radical act of going-over from "psychiatry" to poetry. In place of which Pinsky ends with an image of the void itself, and of a world-wide American intelligentsia

All fumbling at so many millions of miles
Per minute and so many dollars per hour
Through the exploding or collapsing spaces
Between stars, saying what we can.

Weldon Kees³ was a poet in the style of Corbière and Laforgue, and, behind them, of Baudelaire. He was born in Beatrice, Nebraska in 1914; in July of 1955 his car was found abandoned by the Golden Gate Bridge. The voice of his early work clearly echoes the Eliot of the Prufrock and Sweeney poems; it is a voice that Eliot only entertained in hopes of salvation, and that Lowell later tried out but could not sustain; Kees seems to have been born to it. The true impulse of his work shows in its constantly surprising inventiveness and in the certainty and naturalness of its speech. Kenneth Rexroth wrote of him: "Others have called themselves Apocalyptics, Kees lived in a permanent and hopeless apocalypse." He never underwent a conversion. The rhythms and the tone of his later poems are reminiscent of Montale:

Over the empty harbor, gray and motionless,
The clouds have been gathering all afternoon, and now
The sea is pitted with rain. Wind shakes the house.
(*"The Umbrella"*)

These comparisons may help to locate Kees's work, but they do not define it. He deliberately maintained the position of a minor poet, acknowledging no cultural mission, no moral duty, no national service. He was an alienated man, but he did not embrace alienation or mistake the nature of it, and there was no resigned acceptance in him. The poem

³ THE COLLECTED POEMS OF WELDON KEES, revised edition, ed. *Donald Justice*. University of Nebraska/ Bison Books. \$3.95.

"Year's End" was addressed to a friend who was killed in World War II; it ends with these lines:

So rot in a closet in the ground
For the bad trumpets and the capitol's
Long seasonable grief. Rot for its guests,
Alive, that step away from death. Yet you,
A year cold, come more living to this room
Than these intruders, vertical and warm.

Death here is not subject to conceptual inversions, and men are not absolved of responsibility for what they do (that is even clearer in the first part of the poem). The force behind the reversal in the last two lines is the truth of an elementary human emotion.

There is a hard humor in Kees's work, as in the series of superb historical epitaphs called "Testimonies." The fourth one reads:

"I watch the world contract to this
Gray winter Grub Street where the scavengers
Drop in the cold. The famine spreads more every day.
God save the King, the Army, and the House of Lords.
The rags drop from my arms outside the coffee-house."

Kees was a rare thing, especially among us—a true citizen of the twentieth century. His disappearance in the middle of it may say something about the price of citizenship. He was as much and as little at home in this century as Catullus was in Julius Caesar's Rome or Villon in fifteenth-century Paris. If the air were not so empurpled with bids for the bardic chair, we might hear his voice more clearly.

Charles Causley is an equally gifted poet, but of an opposite kind. He was born in Cornwall and still lives there; he is a teacher, not a university professor but a village schoolmaster, which is a very different thing in relation to the life of a place. Much that seems strange in his work,⁴ I suspect, has local origins. I don't mean the strangeness of the supernatural, of ballads about ghosts and spirits, though there is that too, but the unusual stringency of his language, a violence at times that seems to go beyond what the subject calls for. The speech he hears and makes into poetry is not quite present-day English. In directness of address, in turns of phrase and image, and in a particular quality of imagination, his work reminds me of Scots Gaelic poetry:

I walked where in their talking graves
And shirts of earth five thousand lay
("At the British War Cemetery, Bayeux")

⁴ COLLECTED POEMS 1951-1975, by *Charles Causley*. David Godine. \$12.50 cloth; \$5.95 paper.

Much of it is a poetry of place. But it is hard to say that a Cornish tradition stands behind it, in the sense that one can speak of a Gaelic tradition in the Highlands. Causley does not speak directly about Cornish culture or cultivate the politics of Cornish separatism, as MacDiarmid has done in Scotland. Beyond the feeling that his work is nourished by something more generic than his own sensibility, which sets him somewhat apart from his English contemporaries, there are only hints. His early poem "Cornwall" begins:

One day, friend and stranger,
 The granite beast will rise
 Rubbing the salt sea from his hundred eyes
 Sleeping no longer.

In the running river he will observe the tree
 Forging the long signature of summer
 And like Caliban he will stumble and clamour
 Crying *I am free! I am free!*

And he has a poem about William the Conqueror "bringing history under," but which may just as well be an attack on all generals as on the particular general whose victory sealed the fate of Cornish culture.

There are poems in this book that I find hard to read, especially some of the ballads, though the long ballad of "Young Edgcumbe" is so close to the best of the traditional ballads that it makes me forget my own self-consciousness. Not all of Weldon Kees's poems strike me as equally successful either. The advantage of having a collected edition is that one can read selectively; the reading will be fruitful provided the work comes from a productive system of thought; and there is no need to talk about poorly turned machine parts. What distinguishes Causley's work is its openness, its unselfconsciousness, its disdain of the precious and the overwrought, its crudeness and compression. The poem "At Grantchester" shows the power of his lyrics; I would like to quote all four stanzas, but here is the last:

The swilling sea with its unvarying thunder
 Explores the secret face of famous stone.
 On the thrown wind blown words like hurt birds wander
 That from the maimed, the murdered mouth have flown.

The construction is to some extent conventional, but the language is not. The relationship between meaning and formality is in the right order here. Causley's language is strongly physical, filled with details of the Cornish land- and sea-scape, but it is never merely descriptive:

Listen. Through the clear shell of air the voices

Still strike like water from the mountain bed;
 The cry of those who to a certain valley
 Hungry and innocent came. And were not fed.

These lines come at the end of "School at Four O'Clock," a poem about his work as a teacher. The solipsism of so much of contemporary writing leaves us unprepared for a poet who takes common life, that is, our life in common, as a reality outside the poem rather than as a pretext for composition—though the difference between a style and mannerism rests on that distinction. Our vague sophistication also leaves us unprepared for the almost peasant literalism of Causley's religious vision. The poem "Emblems of the Passion" contrasts one who carries emblems in his head with one who sees them in the flesh. In the last stanza, the fleshly one confronts the intellectual:

Underneath that seamless sky
 Stripped, I met your startled eye,
 Saw your sweating lip, and I
 Whose face was Judas, felt you start
 At the rivers of the heart.

Those lines are as close to the source of Causley's poetry as any in his book.

This is not a brief against modernism. I think that what makes good poetry is always the same, the use of words in such a way that "the thing is in the word." Empty words are empty, whether they are arranged according to modernist or traditional tenets. The defence of modernist technique is the vitality of the work it produces. In the work of Louis Zukofsky there is considerable vitality. The publication of Zukofsky's "A" is completed with these two new sections⁵ (the musical conclusion, "A" 24, was published three years ago). The poem that began with "A Round of fiddles playing Bach . . ." reaches here a kind of musical speaking in which sound verges on a total displacement of meaning. But it is not that simple. A language reduced to sound would be no language at all. Zukofsky does something else; he uses words in ways that make their meaning appear tenuous, a momentary crystallizing of the flow of sound. The effect is one of discovery and surprise, of *initial speaking*. And that seems to be the burden of the opening, stanzaic section of "A" 22: "sweet treble hold lovely—initial." The middle section is an undivided passage (it runs for twenty-two small pages) constructed on a principle stated this way at the start: "word time a voice bridled/ as order, what is eternal/ is living . . ." It is a history of a sort, but Zukofsky says, "History's best emptied of names'/ impertinence . . ." It is geological history, or a history embedded in geology. The asides that point to that understanding are only asides; the main thing is in the words moving in rhythm that represent

⁵ "A" 22 & 23, by Louis Zukofsky. Viking/Cape. \$3.95.

historical growth-as-presence. Part of that process is the growth of language, and the rising of thought out of language, through methods of recording, like knots in the rope that the Incas used for communication: "new knots renewed ink anew." Midway through, Zukofsky begins to give his Book of Proverbs—lines and fragments from the Presocratic philosophers, the Hellenistic commentators, Epicurus, the Buddha, some of them charmingly translated: "Man featherless two-legs." Charm must be the frailest of poetic qualities. Much of the poetry here, and all through "A", depends on it: "little horse can you speak/ won't know till it speaks." But it holds its place in the poem, as its signum. Interspersed with fragments from the philosophers are passages that mouth the original words, the way his *Catullus* mouths the Latin, and, in keeping with his principle, none of them is named in other than punning ways: "Pith or gore has 4/ seasons . . ." What his thinkers thought is not important to the poem; that is, it is not *thought* in the poem. What was once recorded is unearthed here, caught still in the substance of human speech. Language is to thought as the earth is to history: the "anachronous stone" is there in your hand. That is the nature of Zukofsky's historical materialism, which he sets in opposition to the historicism of the "scribes" who "conceive history as tho/ sky, sun, men never were."

"A" 22 ends with another stanzaic section, which seems to be a kind of botanical lament, thematically pointed in the line: "the comedy's divine, tragic a Thought." "A" 23 continues the impulse of the previous section, its opening stanzas ending in a clear statement:

words earth—the saving history
not to deny the gifts
of time where those who
never met together may hear
this other time sound *one*.

The long concluding section begins with a Zukofskian rendering of the Gilgamesh story and leads into speakings of Greek, Latin, fragments of the *Bacchae* and other mythical bits, Provençal, Anglo-Saxon (the opening of *Beowulf*), some passages of sixteenth-century English (Shakespeare and others), all performed with great mastery of word-sense and verse movement. It is an enactment of Zukofsky's vision of "this other time" in a fit of glossolalia: an inhabited cosmos speaking all at once. The charm of his writing imparts a human warmth, a lived-in quality to the whole of "A", which, for all its length, remains a small poem, enclosed, a household. To place it alongside the *Cantos*, as some readers have done (speaking rather indiscriminately of "the long poem"), is to realize that the two are opposites, that "A" is the anti-epic *par excellence*, that the epic is the poem of unhoused mankind but that this poem has always been what it becomes here: a spiritual canticle of human habitation, "beginning ardent; to end blest."

One thing that is possibly obscured by the term "modernism" is the

archaizing tendency of its genuine works—archaizing not in the revival of outdated mannerisms, which is exactly what these poets do not do, but in the search for an *archē*, a beginning, and the initiating force of a beginning. George Oppen is a modernist in that sense. In his continual searching into the ground and the relationships of a public life, political in the original sense, he recalls one of the beginning tasks of poetry: the holding open of the common world, the place of humanity. He is a civic poet, as Solon was a civic poet; but without a *polis*, and that is the modern aspect of his work. Hence the dialectical tensions that inform this austere and integral book.⁶

When Oppen asked, in an interview, “whether or not we can deal with humanity as something which actually does exist,” he was not posing an ontological problem. That is, he was not asking whether this mass of human beings can be perceived as existing, but whether the notion of humanity still has any meaning and what the conditions of its existence are, or might be. That is a fairly complicated question, and it is central to his work. Yet the habit among his readers has been to talk about the simplicity, the clarity, the “minimal” quality of these poems, and their presentation of a “primitive reality.” I think there is some confusion in that way of thinking. Imagist poetics are problematical anyway; imagism is based on the primacy of sight, of seeing, in poetry; but how can words translate something seen, how can (or do) they make an image see-able? The poem of Oppen’s that is most often cited as presenting the reality of the seen thing is “Psalm,” which begins:

In the small beauty of the forest
The wild deer bedding down—
That they are there!

and ends:

The small nouns
Crying faith
In this in which the wild deer
Startle, and stare out.

There is nothing *seen* in it. It is a pure construction of what is precisely *not* visible, and not only because the poet could not have observed “the wild deer bedding down” but because he doesn’t claim to have observed them. It is a poem about words, and its real effort is to name not the deer but *that in which* they “startle, and stare out,” which is not the forest or the night or nature herself, which cannot be perceived phenomenally but can be realized only by the human mind, and then only through the mediation of words. The experience is felt as a kind of seeing, but the perception is of what is most fugitive and fleeting; “alien” and “strange” are the words Oppen associates with it. The clarity of the poem is remarkable, consid-

⁶COLLECTED POEMS, by *George Oppen*. New Directions. \$15.95. (Paperback edition to be published Fall 1976.)

ering the difficulty of what it attempts, but to say that it is simple and empirical and has to do with primitive reality seems to me to be misleading.

A merely empirical poetry, if such a thing existed, could be developed endlessly but only and always on the same level; it would have to transcend itself on pain of falling into absurdity. And that is true of human beings also. "The universe exists for all time, and is without value for all time," as a French philosopher wrote. But Oppen has said that his aim from the start was "to construct a method of thought from the imagistic technique of poetry," which is something else again.

Yet Oppen indicated by placing this phrase of Heidegger's at the start of one of his books that he was taking "the arduous path of appearance." How that can be the path of a political poet may be clarified if I bring together two more of his public statements: first, that "virtue of the mind is that emotion which causes to see," and then, "there is no life for humanity except the life of the mind." The profound and unexpected originality of Oppen's poetry lies in its construing of the relationships between perception ("virtue of the mind") and the opening of a public realm, a *polis*, a place for humanity, in which humanity transcends mass isolation. For, contrary to the views of most politicians, and perhaps most political thinkers, the public thing is not grounded in opinion, in consensus, in theory, in state power or institutions, but in "the right construction of what-is." Those words are a paraphrase from Hölderlin, who also wrote: "Poets, even the spiritual ones, must be worldly." A poet's work belongs to the world, but before that it is an opening up of the common, of what-is for humanity. Before it is speech, poetry is a space prepared for speech.

Works of that kind do not only belong to the world, they enact the "worlding" of the world. What Oppen sees, in "Chartres," is

The bulk of it
In air

which is "what they wanted." He does not deny the religious vision embodied in the cathedral, or that it was built by inspiration, but what he sees in it is its worlding presence:

Above the farmland
Above the will

Because a hundred generations
Back of them and to another people

The world cried out above the mountain.

But his eye also sees contrasts, testing the qualities of human works

against each other. Because if there are works that are worlding, there are also works that are alienating, that is, works that are not only products of alienation but producers of it. As far back as the *Discrete Series* of 1934, he had written of an automobile:

Moving in traffic
This thing is less strange—
Tho the face, still within it,
Between glasses—place, over which
 time passes—a false light.

The richness of meaning that Oppen condenses into separate poems is revealed only in their relation to each other, only, that is, in re-reading. These relations are constantly present in his work and are constantly in question in his mind; they are what is unspoken in the ellipses between poems and between parts of the same poem; they are what is to be seen, which cannot be said any other way. That is nowhere more true than in the sequence, *Of Being Numerous*. He understands the nature of alienation as "worldlessness," and that both the singular and the numerous are negations of the common, that political, open space constituted by a plurality of singular acts. The opening of the common holds people together as it holds them apart; it is, above all, the place for speaking. In the city that embodies the ambiguous "meaning/ Of being numerous," one hears the noise of cars that "echo like history/ Down walled avenues/ In which one cannot speak," or at best "a ferocious mumbling, in public/ Of rootless speech." Reading the poem, one realizes how directly the problematics of modern poetry, not to mention modern politics, are connected to the disappearance or closing-in of the common world:

We want to defend
Limitation
And do not know how.

Stupid to say merely
That poets should not lead their lives
Among poets,

They have lost the metaphysical sense
Of the future, they feel themselves
The end of a chain

Of lives, single lives (. . .)

And cannot defend
The metaphysic
On which rest

The boundaries
Of our distances.

But the ambivalence of the poem rests on the possibilities that are still there, and can be found nowhere else, for an authentic public life, the worlding of the world and the housing of humanity—something he had glimpsed earlier in the Red Hook section of Brooklyn:

This sense of order
And of threat. The essential city,
The necessary city
Among these harbor streets still visible.

It is even more visible in another poem, too rich for me to be able to say very much about it here, entitled "Eros." It is a poem about Paris, at once deeply personal, political, and historical; even the title says more than can very well be commented on. It is the Eros of history, expressed as "A devoutness/ Toward the future/ Recorded in this city . . ." And it is also the love that is embodied in commemoration:

Yet they come here too, the old . . .
To the plaque of the ten thousand
Last men of the Commune
Shot at that wall
In the cemetery of Père-Lachaise, and the grave
Of Largo Caballero and the monuments to the Resistance—

details that are politically eloquent in themselves, and part of Oppen's own memory as well. The poem ends with a passage that draws all of these things together, and all that I've attempted to say:

Closed by their roofs
And complete, a culture
Mined
From the ground . . .
As tho the powerful gift
Of their presence
And the great squares void
Of their dead
Were the human tongue
That will speak.

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